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A GOLDEN SORROW





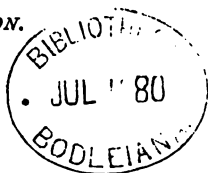
A
GOLDEN SORROW.

BY
MRS. CASHEL HOEY.

"I swear, 'tis better to be lowly born,
And range with humble livers in content,
Than to be perk'd up in a glistening grief,
And wear a golden sorrow."

King Henry the Eighth.

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A GOLDEN SORROW.

CHAPTER I.

CANDIDATES.

MIRIAM CLINT was about to leave school. She was not glad of it. She was eighteen years old, and had her notions and visions about "coming out," like other girls of her age, and especially of her appearance. The time to which these notions would naturally have tended, and these visions soared, was at hand, and yet Miriam Clint was not glad. This is a paradox which requires explanation. Miriam had every reason to believe that her visions would remain entirely unfulfilled; she had good cause to like the school at which she had passed eight years in tolerable comfort to herself, and harmony with her surroundings; but she had no cause whatever to like home, or to anticipate that it would be more endurable when she should have returned thither "for good," than it had been during her dismal holidays.

Miriam was not of a sentimental disposition, but she had strong feelings, and a good deal of decision of character—a combination which made her a favourite at Miss Monitor's school. She was in earnest in her likes and dislikes; and being as good-natured as a clever, healthy girl usually is, especially when she is freely acknowledged to be much prettier than her companions, her likes were more numerous than her dislikes. Thus, there was commotion and dismay at

Crescent House, Hampstead, when it became known that Mr. Clint had refused to accede to Miriam's petition for "one more half," and that she was to go home immediately. Miriam became more emphatically than ever a "poor darling;" and Mr. Clint, her father, who had always been considered a "horrid man," now received public mention as an "old brute." There was less injustice in this designation than usually attends a sweeping censure. Mr. Clint *was* an old brute. Until within three days of breaking-up time, Miriam had hoped to gain her father's consent to her remaining at Crescent House, not because she wished to remain, and counted on his indulgence for that reason, but because she honestly believed he must dislike the prospect of her return as much as she did.

"It is impossible I can ever be anything but a tremendous bore to papa," she said, frankly, to Miss Monitor, with whom she was on confidential terms. "Every one bores him, you know, but Walter and I bore him above and beyond everybody else. I suppose it is just for appearances' sake he wants me home, and I can't help hoping he won't be able to resist the temptation of getting rid of me for six more months."

Miss Monitor shook her tight little head, and replied,—

"My dear, I should not count on that, if I were you. If your papa is having you home against his inclination, or even without it, for appearances' sake, I can only say it is the first time I have ever heard of his making such a sacrifice. No, no, Miriam; depend upon it, you will have to go."

Miss Monitor was right. Suspense in the school-room, and hope in the breast of Miriam and her young friends, were put an end to by the arrival of the post on the following morning. Miriam opened her father's letter, and the first glance settled the question.

"The Firs, 3rd June, 18—.

"*Dr Miriam* ['There!'] was the girl's mental commentary; 'he is always more ill-tempered than usual when he uses abbreviations! What ill-tempered and ill-bred things they are!']—*You have given me the trouble of writing two letters in-*

stead of one. Don't do that again. You will come home as arranged, on the 6th ; I have put an adv^t for a maid in some m^o papers, and directed applicants to call at Cres^t House to-morrow between the hours of 12 and 4. From among them you will select, with Miss M.'s advice, a suitable person to attend upon you, make your clothes, &c. Wages £20. The person you select must be ready to come here with you on the 6th. You will come by express, leaving Lond. B^o at 11 a.m.—Y^r truly,

“REG. CLINT.”

Tears of anger rose in Miriam's eyes. “It isn't only that he refuses my request, but he puts it aside in such a cold, contemptuous way,” she muttered ; “I shall never be able to care for him in the least, or get on better with him ; and I *did* mean to try. It's well for Walter he's a man ; he can do as he likes ; *he* is not obliged to stay at home, and put up with papa. I don't wonder at him ; I couldn't blame him for *anything* !”

“Miriam,” said Miss Monitor, entering the room with her accustomed precision of step and manner, but with a decided increase of the winter-apple colouring of her plump cheeks, “I need not ask you what news you have. Your father treats *me* with scanty courtesy, and I suppose blames me for your unwillingness to go home. He *might* recognize that at least you have been happy here.”

“*He* doesn't care, dear,” said Miriam, flinging her arms round Miss Monitor's prim little figure with energy that caused that lady to rock upon her tightly shod little feet, and obliged her to rearrange her collar, her apron, her cuffs, and her neck-ribbon. “He doesn't know anything about my being happy or unhappy, and as for gratitude !—well, never mind—I'm grateful, and I always shall be.”

“I am sure of that,” said Miss Monitor ; and then perhaps remembering that the tone in which they were discussing Miriam's father was not the most appropriate to their mutual relation, she changed it for one of admonition mingled with consolation. *Miriam* listened with ill-disguised impatience,

and showed how very little she understood the principle of that filial obedience and reverence which Miss Monitor was, with some inconsistency, endeavouring to instil into her, by assuring her impetuously that she would do her very best to "put up with" her father, for Miss Monitor's sake.

Miss Monitor had some reason to be offended with Mr. Clint. His letter to her contained the following words :

"D' Madam—Be so good as to acknowledge by return the enclosed cheque for am^t of y^r acc^t, and to send Miss Clint home, according to my directions.—Y^r truly,

"REG. CLINT."

Miss Monitor was not a high-minded woman, but neither was she a humbug. She did not "train the minds of her pupils," as the modern style of prospectus has it, to any transcendental heights of principle or feeling; she made no professions of horror at the notion of a lady's boarding-school being a speculation intended to pay, for she had intended hers to pay, and it was paying, and no woman in the world knew better than she did that no school could be really like home, if home were all it should be. But she knew equally well, and practically, that honesty is the best policy; and she was honest, according to her light. She liked Miriam Clint, but she had no accurate comprehension of either her strength or her weaknesses; and she could hardly have been expected to understand how much the girl, who would have genuinely preferred to remain at Crescent House rather than return to her father's roof, stood in need of pity. To Miriam, duty translated itself by "devoirs," and pleasure meant going to select evening parties, and occasionally to a concert, with one or two other favoured pupils, under the auspices of Miss Monitor; and taking riding lessons in the early summer mornings, with her particular school-friends, on which occasions the riding-master was accompanied by his pretty young wife. Nothing could be more proper or more pleasant, Miriam then thought. She hated leaving all this, and she hated the thought *of the home she was going to.*

The position of affairs seemed to absolve Miss Monitor and Miriam from any bonds of conventional restraint.

"I never was a hypocrite about it, was I, dear?" said Miriam. "Don't you remember, long ago, when we did our compositions for Mr. Walker, I never *would* write letters about the pleasures of home and the delights of the country? There is no pleasure in home to me, and I always did and always shall hate the country."

"Don't say that, Miriam," said Miss Monitor, with a wise shake of her hand. "You would like it very much if you were married to a country gentleman with a nice property." Miss Monitor's own vision of ultimate bliss was retirement to a cottage, with a cow and poultry-yard. "Depend on it, that would make all the difference. And, remember, you must have gone home in order for *that* to happen. You couldn't have married here."

"I'm not so sure of *that*," said Miriam impetuously; then, recollecting herself, she added with some confusion, "At least—I mean something *might* have turned up, you know. However, it is all over now, and there's no good in talking about it; but of one thing you may be certain, if ever I marry a country gentleman, he must be well enough off to take me away from the country—no rurality for *me*."

The dialogue was interrupted by Jane, a trim parlour-maid, who informed her mistress that a "young person" had called about the maid's place for Miss Clint. There was an additional shade of respect in Jane's manner of mentioning Miriam, a recognition of her added dignity in the prospective possession of an own maid.

"Take her into the waiting-room, and say I will see her presently," said Miss Monitor; who added, when Jane withdrew, "Go and smooth your hair, Miriam, and make yourself tidy before you see this person. It would never do for her to see you looking like that."

"Oh, what can it matter?" said Miriam rebelliously, in the *thoroughness* of her ill-humour and discontent. "The

question is, whether she will suit *me*, not whether I shall suit her."

"There is a little of both in the question, my dear," replied Miss Monitor decisively; "and it is *always* worth every one's while to make a favourable impression."

This was a lesson which Miss Monitor might be fully trusted to administer to her pupils.

Miriam ran upstairs to her own room, as the bedroom she shared with only one little girl, the youngest pupil, might fairly be styled. There were no signs of packing about—she had retained sufficient hope to put that off to the last moment—and the room was neat and lightsome.

"*She*—this she, or another—may do all that *now*," mused Miriam; "I may as well begin to make her useful. Well, it *is* some comfort to be allowed to choose for myself; papa might have inflicted some horrid old witch of a woman upon me. In that vile place, it will be something to have a decent person to speak to, even if it's only a servant; and I won't have her if she is not nice-looking." Miriam was smoothing her hair, and looking at her face in the glass. It was a handsome face, but not one easy to describe, or rather, to realize from description, for it had a great variety of looks, and was not equally pleasing in all. It was not an unrefined face, but it wanted that last touch of refinement which only a habit of lofty and unselfish thought gives, and it was not quite frank. It was a face which would have pleased a painter more than a physiognomist, though it did not lack either intelligence or purpose.

Miriam Clint was tall and well-formed, with a firm, upright carriage, and a full, pillar-like throat. Her face was not beautiful, if one is to bow to the regular-feature theory of beauty, for her nose belonged to no particular order, but was simply a white, waxen little nose which became her; and her mouth was rather large. But the short, well-bred upper lip, and the strong, pleasant-looking white teeth, were handsome enough to *please anybody who was not too coldly critical*; while the eyes,

which looked out under a broad, smooth forehead, and straight, dark eyebrows, were undeniably beautiful. They were not black, or of any of the shades of colour which are called black ; they were not even dark, though they seemed so, in certain lights, by favour of their thick dark lashes : they were the true, rare, wonderful golden eyes ; the eyes which painters dare not imitate, unless they are cunning indeed, because the colour is so subtle, and the light in them so living ; the eyes that are called hazel, but are not hazel, and brownish grey, but are neither brown nor grey, nor anything but golden, though they have sometimes small brown dots, which enhance their beauty, beneath the irides. These eyes were most beautiful when Miriam was troubled. Then they softened and deepened in a wonderful, touching way, and the observer would be moved to instant sympathy with that most becoming sorrow.

But Miriam had not yet learned the value of this particular charm ; her troubles had been hitherto shared and soothed by her girl-companions only, and they, though loyally unanimous in decreeing to Miriam the palm of beauty—she certainly was the prettiest girl at Crescent House—were not sufficiently critical to understand why it was that Miriam did not look any less pretty when she cried, or was “going to,” than at other times. If, with her golden eyes, Miriam had had fair hair, she might have had a chance of belonging to an “order” of beauty, she might have claimed a “style,” and been described as of the Venetian school, or in the genre of Petrarch’s Laura. But she had not fair hair. She had a great quantity of rich dark-brown hair, very glossy, and rather “crinkly,” to use the expressive school-girl phrase. It was set around her broad, low forehead, so that the dusky, downy roots showed, and it distinctly marked the five points which artists bid us admire. Miriam was rather inclined to grumble about her hair ; she had been born too late for the “raven-locks” period, and was only to be consoled when, on close inspection, some spiral threads of vivid red were detected amid the shiny darkness, spiral threads which made little *rings upon her broad temples*, and curled about her

ears, and on the back of her neck. Her complexion was as unfashionable as her hair. It was not "dazzling;" it had no resemblance to porcelain or alabaster. It was rather fair, and the blue veins showed prettily at the sides of her forehead, under the curved edge of her dark hair; but she had not much colour, considering her perfect health, only a faint tinge high up on either cheek, just where women who understand the art apply that matchless white rouge which "rubs in" pink, and will stand anything—sun, dust, gas, the close inspection of the *valse*, and even judicious tears. The looking-glass showed Miriam this face of hers, very pretty, she thought it, in spite of the discontent and vexation she was giving way to. "I must go home to marry, must I?" she muttered, as she pulled her rich plaits of hair out, and stuck additional pins here and there amidst its masses. "I don't think Charley Boscombe is of that opinion; but he won't do. He's very nice, poor boy, and I like him; but I mean to be a rich woman, and to have my own way. One can't have that, if one isn't rich; at least, it must only be an own way not worth having. And now for this 'maid'—it sounds grand; I wonder father thought it necessary to be so particular about me."

She glanced at the glass once more, and then ran downstairs. The waiting-room, a small apartment behind the large dining-room, of a gloomy character, and provided with furniture of a depressing tendency, was of a "general-utility" complexion, and was the resort of everybody who had business to transact with Miss Monitor, except parents and guardians. For them were reserved the glistening splendours of the drawing-room, with its shell ornaments, its moral books in morocco, its grand walnut-wood piano in a speckled leather cover, and the portraits of Dr. and Mrs. Monitor (deceased) very high up on the panels at either side of the huge chimney-piece.

"You understand hair-dressing, of course?" Miss Monitor was saying as Miriam entered the room, and stood, in her *girl-hood fashion*, just within the door. "Ah, this is the lady who

may require your services. Sit down, my dear. I have been inquiring into this person's capabilities"—Miss Monitor turned to Miriam, and the "person" did the same—"and I am rather afraid she is not sufficiently experienced. She makes plain gowns only; would not undertake trimmed skirts. Would that do, my dear? Do you not think your father wishes your maid to be an experienced dressmaker?"

"I—I don't exactly know. He said in his letter—here it is"—Miriam produced the document from her apron pocket, and the "person" glanced at it quickly, then turned her eyes away, and sat impassive, looking at nothing—"She must make your clothes, &c." "I suppose that means all my dresses?"

"Then I am a little afraid," began Miss Monitor, in the elaborately gracious tone of a person about to terminate an interview with a refusal. But Miriam was not disposed to settle the matter so quickly. The novelty of the position pleased her.

"Oh," she began, "perhaps she might do. I should like to know where she had lived, and what she can do. You were asking her whether she could dress hair. Can you?" asked Miriam, speaking directly for the first time, to the "person," whom she had been looking at with some curiosity. The candidate did not lend herself to inspection very readily. Her manner was shy, and somewhat embarrassed; and her attitude, with down-cast eyes, and bent head, was to match. "I can't bear people who do not look me in the face," thought Miriam; "if it were only on account of that trick, she will not suit me."

"I can dress hair, madam," replied the candidate in a low, slow voice, "in any style. You will find it mentioned in my testimonial from Lady Ware."

At this moment the great bell at the very imposing gateway which gave admittance to Crescent House rang loudly; and, as this occurrence indicated an exceptional arrival—there was a smaller gate in the high brick wall, for the use of tradespeople, *the inmates of the house*, and habitual comers—Miss

Monitor approached the door, and listened for an explanation. Presently, heavy steps crossed the hall, and there was a rustling, pleasantly suggestive of a stiff and voluminous silk gown traversing the shining tiles.

"A lady and gentleman to see you, ma'am," said Jane, who appeared with a card on a salver; "there's a young lady with them," she added significantly.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Monitor. "Miriam, I must leave you. I shouldn't wonder if they had come on business. Mr. and Mrs. Dibley. I don't know the name. Is my cap straight?"

"Quite. You look charming, dear," said Miriam good-naturedly, as she gave Miss Monitor's dress a pull here and a pat there, towering considerably above her the while. "Don't keep them waiting a minute; don't mind me."

At the sound of the bell the candidate had moved slightly, and a close observer would have seen a look of eagerness come into her face. She was a tall woman, rather dowdily dressed—for a person aspiring to the smart position of lady's maid—in a brown silk gown, and a black shawl with a wide lace flounce, a garment which she huddled up in her arms in an ungraceful fashion, and in which her hands were completely hidden as she sat, in a round-backed manner, of itself calculated to shock Miss Monitor. During the brief dialogue between that lady and Miriam, the candidate watched them with intense anxiety, unseen by either; and when Miriam held the door open that Miss Monitor might pass through, she half rose, but instantly resealed herself before Miriam had turned her head in her direction.

"As you seem uncertain about being able to make my dresses," said Miriam, keeping her eyes fixed on her father's letter, and now only wishing to get rid of the candidate as quickly as possible, "I fear it would be giving you useless trouble, and taking up your time needlessly, to go into further particulars."

There was no reply. Miriam looked up, and saw the candi-

date, with one hand stretched towards her, and the finger of the other on her lip. She recoiled in sudden fear, her eyes fixed on the woman's face ; a strange, incredible sense of recognition taking paralyzing possession of her.

"Miriam," said the candidate, rising, "don't be frightened ; and, above all, don't make a noise. There's nothing the matter !"

"Good heavens !" cried Miriam, throwing herself into the woman's arms, and clasping her wildly about the neck, "it's Walter !"

CHAPTER II.

VERY SUCCESSFUL.

"DARLING Miriam! don't agitate yourself; keep quiet," said the young man who wore his disguise so awkwardly, as he cordially returned the girl's caress, and then placed her in the chair in which Miss Monitor had been sitting, and resumed his own seat facing the door. "I have a very short time, and a good deal to say in it."

"But, Walter—why? How? Is not this a risk?"

Walter Clint settled his brown silk gown becomingly about his lengthy limbs, and tucked his arms up in his lace-flounced shawl, before he replied. During this brief operation Miriam regarded him with an expression in which the school-girl's sense of "great fun" was beginning to break, in a smile, through her first feeling of supreme and somewhat dismayed amazement.

"Of course it is a risk," he replied; but *what could I do?* I had to see you, and it would not have been fair to Miss Monitor to ask her to disobey my father's injunctions, and let me see you, even if she would have done it, and I don't suppose she would. Do you?"

"Oh yes; I think she would *now*," said Miriam. "I am really to leave, you know, and she need not fear papa any longer."

"Well, never mind; I didn't know that—I mean, I didn't think of it. I *had* to see you before you left London."

"Why?" asked Miriam, a deep flush passing over her face.

"You don't—you can't mean to say I am not to see you at *The Firs?*"

"I do mean it, Miriam. There's no good in getting into a rage about it, and there's no good in crying. He is obstinately set against me, and I cannot stand any more quarrelling and bullying. I don't mean to say I have not deserved a good deal ; but I do mean to say I have had more than I deserved, and there has come an end of it. I shall ask my father—at least, I shall get you to ask him—one thing more only (never mind what), and then he shall hear nothing of me, unless it be very good news indeed, which would surprise no one so much as myself ; for I am one of the unlucky ones, you know."

"This is worse than all," said Miriam, into whose eyes tears, which she was resolutely trying to hold back, had risen. "It is bad enough to have to go home at all ; but it is too much to be quite cut off from seeing you. How cruel ! how unjust !" and now she fairly sobbed.

"Hush, Miriam, for heaven's sake !" said Walter. "Suppose Miss Monitor were to come back and find you in tears ! There's a good girl, the best of girls to a poor devil of a brother who is always in scrapes. Time is running on, and you will have another young person looking after the lady's-maid's place presently."

They both laughed, and yet Miriam was so conscious that there was something unusual in Walter's manner—a change extending to his voice—that she was afraid of what he might be going to tell her, and did not dare to question him.

"I have taken a serious resolution, Miriam," he said. "Don't stir, dear ; they listen at doors in boarding-schools, I've been told, and they peep through keyholes. It must have come to this, sooner or later, and I have a chance now—a good chance. You shall know all about it ; but there was one thing on my mind, and no one but you could take it off. I have come to you to get you to take it off in this queer fashion, because it must be done at once, if at all, and I had no other means."

"What is it, Walter ?" asked Miriam, who was pale and quiet *enough now*.

"My father advertised for a maid for you. A friend of mine—a person in whom I am very much interested—would be very glad to get the place. She will be here presently. Others may come before she does; promise me you will find some reason for rejecting each until Rose Dixon comes to you, and then promise me you will take her."

"Walter, who is she?"

"I cannot tell you *now*. Don't hesitate, Miriam; don't refuse me. You were always ready to do anything for me, you know, in the old times, and you never had half such a chance of serving me as this one. You know, Miriam, I would not ask you to have any one near you who was not fit to be with you, dear; you can trust me for *that*."

Miriam listened to him in amazement. She was intelligent, quick, as inquisitive as most girls of her age, and no more of an *ingénue* than was to be expected of her, considering that she was one of twenty girls in a London boarding-school. She was perfectly sensible of the necessity and the value of this assurance of her brother's, and with it her first feeling of alarm subsided, and the strong desire to please and serve him sprang up untrammelled.

"I can trust you for anything, Walter," she said; "but tell me one thing. Is she very young? Will Miss Monitor agree? Remember, she is to have a voice in the matter."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that; but I don't think you would have much difficulty in getting over Miss Monitor's objections, if she should have any, and that's not likely. Rose Dixon is very young and very pretty." Again there was a tone in Walter's voice and a look in Walter's face strange to Miriam.

A bell rang sharply; they heard Jane coming up the kitchen-stairs, and voices sounded on the landing. Miss Monitor's visitors were departing; once more the heavy rustling silk trailed itself over the shining tiles, and the murmur of gracious tones reached the waiting-room.

"*Promise me, Miriam, promise me,*" entreated Walter, as

he rose and shook his obnoxious garments into shape ; while Miriam, clasping his hand eagerly, looked towards the door in alarm.

“ I promise, dear—I promise.”

“ God bless you, darling ! Remember the name—Rose Dixon. You shall know all in a very short time.”

“ And I shall see you soon, Walter ? ”

“ I hope so ; I cannot tell. If I can possibly get my father’s leave.”

A step at the door, a hand on the lock. Miriam, in silence, touched her brother’s cheek with her lips, deftly lowered the thick lace veil which was turned back over his straw bonnet, and sat down in Miss Monitor’s chair, just an instant before that lady entered the room, radiant with good-humour.

The candidate was standing in a respectful attitude ; Miss Clint was looking bored. Miss Monitor took in the scene with her customary complacent correctness.

“ My dear Miriam, I fear you have been detaining this young person unreasonably. There was really no occasion for my seeing her again. You have decided that she will not suit you ? ”

“ Yes,” said Miriam. “ She does not wish to undertake dressmaking ; but I thought she had better wait, as she hoped you might know of a place for her.”

“ I fear I don’t know of one at present,” said Miss Monitor, graciously ; “ but if you will leave your name and address—just write them in that book,” she added, pointing to writing materials which lay on the table—“ I will bear you in mind.”

Walter darted one quick, reproachful glance at Miriam ; she had accounted for the duration of his stay rather *too* well. But Miriam was equal to the occasion ; she perfectly remembered the sinewy, manly, slightly hirsute hands which Walter had so studiously concealed, and knew Miss Monitor’s sharp eyes would detect the discrepancy, though Walter should write the most *womanly* of characters, as indeed he could

have done with ease. He possessed many small accomplishments, and a variety of handwritings was one of them.

"Don't trouble yourself to take your gloves off," said Miriam, drawing the book and the inkstand towards her. "I will take down your address. Ellen Gamble, 6, Bayham Cottages, Camden Town, I think you said?"

"Yes, madam; that is quite correct," was the reply.

Miriam gravely and slowly inscribed the name and address. Her back being turned to Miss Monitor, she ventured on bestowing one glance, full of laughter, on her brother, which his position debarred him from the pleasure of returning; and having formally taken leave of the two ladies, the candidate retired.

"A very awkward-looking person, my dear," was Miss Monitor's comment; "if even she had understood dressmaking, I should not have cared for her; something so dowdy in her appearance. Don't you think so?"

"Oh dear, yes," said Miriam carelessly; "wouldn't have done at all. As I am to have a maid, and am pretty certain to want to make a companion of her, she really must be young and pleasant-looking; at all events, very different from—what's her name?—this Ellen Gamble."

"Of course, my dear. What an odd thing it is that people of that sort never do know when to go away, unless one actually turns them out! And now I must tell you about my visitors."

Miriam drew near with an expression of interest not very skilfully feigned, and which died away, unperceived by Miss Monitor, as she volubly related how the lady of the rustling silk had come to arrange for placing her daughter at school at Crescent House immediately—how all the "extras" were to be supplied, and how the "connexion" was of the most valuable description. "Not aristocracy, my dear," Miss Monitor explained to Miriam, whose approaching departure seemed to have emancipated her from restrictions of every *kind, and elevated her from the position of pupil to that of*

confidant. "If you take *titled* people's children, they are sure to be out at elbows; if they weren't, they would not send their girls to school; and they expect you to take off a percentage, in consideration of the advantage you may derive from talking about their Lady Maries or their Lady Janes. There's no meanness to equal the meanness of great people, when they are not gentlemen and ladies. But a real, solid, respectable connexion is a very different thing. Mrs. Dibley has sisters in India, and brothers in China, and they all have daughters, who are to be sent home; and she as much as said this was an experiment she was going to make for the benefit of the whole family."

"I am so glad," said Miriam, trying to leave off listening for the bell, and looking at the door. "My place will soon be filled up, you see."

"No, no," said Miss Monitor; "a new girl cannot fill your place, Miriam. Dear me, there's the visitor's bell again! It's lucky it's a half-holiday. I wonder who this is."

"Perhaps another young person come to answer the advertisement," suggested Miriam.

"I think not, my dear. People of that sort don't ring the visitors' bell, you know."

It appeared, however, in a few moments, that it was a person "of that sort," who had so far forgotten herself as to ring the visitors' bell. Jane ushered in presently a young woman—whose neatness and appropriate attire offered a striking contrast to the dowdy individual who had preceded her,—with the brief announcement, "Come about the lady's-maid's place, ma'am."

"I hope this is she," thought Miriam, the moment her eyes rested on the face of the young woman, who obeyed Miss Monitor's somewhat lofty invitation to be seated; but she did not venture to anticipate that lady's questions.

"In order to save time," began Miss Monitor, "it is best to ask you at once if you are a good dressmaker? That is indispensable."

"I have been accustomed to make dresses," replied the young woman.

"Where have you lived?"

Miriam thought there was an uneasy look in the face, a little trouble in the voice, as the answer came.

"I have lived with two ladies, madam; they will be happy to recommend me, if the young lady thinks I shall suit her."

Miriam interposed. She felt pretty sure this was the right person.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Rose Dixon," returned the other, but without looking at the young lady, whose eye she had avoided during this brief interrogatory.

Miriam remained standing behind Miss Monitor's chair, looking intently at the "friend" for whose sake her brother had enjoined her to play this comedy, and contrived to make Miss Monitor understand, by sundry significant pinches and nudges, that she considered the new candidate an eligible person for the proposed situation. Rose Dixon was certainly young and nice-looking. The most serious obstacle to the success of the scheme actively organized by Walter, and passively acquiesced in by Miriam, was the danger that Miss Monitor might consider her too young and nice-looking. She was slight, and of small stature; but though her dress was plain, there was no trace of the servant-class about her, neither was there any of the more objectionable pert gentility of the *soubrette*. Miriam feared that she was almost fatally lady-like, and could have wished for less refinement in her features, less harmony in the voice and polish in the accent, for a little more vivid red in the delicate complexion, and somewhat less dependent gentleness in the expression of the clear-cut small features. But her apprehensions were unfounded. She did not reflect that she was looking at Rose Dixon with keen curiosity and interest, with a foretaste of romance, a delicious *anticipation of more to come*; whereas Miss Monitor was re-

garding her merely as an applicant for a servant's place, who might, she hoped, suit in every essential respect, and rid her of any more trouble about the matter. While Miriam was eagerly taking in every detail of Rose Dixon's personal appearance, Miss Monitor was content with observing she was "genteel"-looking, and that she had blue eyes and light brown hair, a "nice" smile, and a pleasant, respectful manner. She answered Miss Monitor's questions satisfactorily, and was content with the wages offered by Mr. Clint. Miriam began to feel triumphant; and she had sufficient tact to be silent, so as not to embarrass Rose Dixon during the cross-examination.

"Gentlemen are not generally good hands at arranging such matters," said Miss Monitor, when she had exhausted her list of questions, "and Mr. Clint has forgotten that he has not given us time to apply to your former employers. You will be required to accompany Miss Clint to The Firs on Thursday, if she should decide on engaging you; and unless the ladies in whose service you have been reside in London, it will not be possible to communicate with them. In that case"—

"Il ne faut pas y faire attention," said Miriam rapidly, and in a lowered voice; "elle a l'air si doux et si bon que—"

"Pardon me, madam," said the young woman, while a vivid blush suffused her face; "I understand French."

"Thank you," said Miriam frankly. "I was only going to say that I think you will suit me, and that, as my father has allowed me so little time, we perhaps might dispense with the usual inquiries."

"Where do your former employers live? Have you any written recommendations?" asked Miss Monitor, very well disposed to take Miriam's view of the case, but still wishing to do everything decently and in order, so far as circumstances permitted.

There was a slight hesitation, just the least possible pause before Rose Dixon answered, and the flush of colour faded out of her face.

"Mrs. Waldron and Mrs. France do not live in London, madam, but I have a letter from each of them."

As she handed the documents to Miss Monitor, Rose Dixon closed her eyes for an instant, and drew a deep breath.

Miss Monitor proceeded to read one of the letters, laying the other on the table beside her. Miriam looked at Rose.

"This is a crisis," she thought, "and she finds it difficult."

"Highly satisfactory ; quite so, indeed," said Miss Monitor, and she held up the letter she had just read, so that Miriam might take it over her shoulder. "Read that, my dear."

The letter was written in a fine, feminine sloping hand, on highly-glazed paper with violet ink, and contained an elegantly worded testimony to the capacity and conduct of Rose Dixon, with an expression of Mrs. Waldron's regret at parting with her. Miriam read it, and compressed her lips—a little movement which was not lost on Rose Dixon.

"And this is equally satisfactory," said Miss Monitor, handing up the second letter in its turn to Miriam, who still retained the first. The two were utterly different in their exterior. The second was written on blue paper, of business-like make, in a thick, bold, upright hand ; and the writer's record of the golden opinions won by Rose Dixon was worded in a downright and forcible manner, which lent the document quite other characteristics. Miriam, still holding the first open, in her left hand, gravely perused the second. The impulse of mischief moved her, just a little.

"This is very nice indeed," she said, looking from one sheet of paper to the other. "How differently Mrs. France of Nottingham and Mrs. Waldron of Peterborough express themselves, and how unlike their respective handwritings are ! If there's any truth in what people say about handwriting betraying the character, you must have been fortunate enough to please two very opposite persons."

She laid the letters on the table, emerging from her post behind Miss Monitor's chair, and as she did so she caught one

swift appealing glance from Rose Dixon's mild blue eyes, which filled her with sudden remorse.

"What a shame for me!" she thought. "No doubt this is a necessary part of Walter's scheme, and she is not to blame for it; I daresay it is a very hard part of it to her. At all events I have no business to play mine so ill."

She began to talk eagerly to Miss Monitor—in the sense of its being quite settled that Rose Dixon was to be her maid—about the necessary packing, and the hour at which they must be at London Bridge Station. Rose Dixon recovered her self-command rapidly, and put the letters into her pocket.

It was also evident to Miriam's quick observation that the necessity for her entering upon her duties so soon was an unpleasant surprise to Rose Dixon. The "wanted, to attend upon a young lady immediately," of Mr. Clint's advertisement had not implied to her that her service was to begin from the following day. Miriam came to her assistance.

"I daresay you cannot get your own things ready before Thursday," she said; "so you need not mind coming here to pack for me. If you are here in good time on Thursday, it will do. They will all help, won't they?" she continued, turning with a smile to Miss Monitor.

"Certainly, my dear."

Miriam felt deeply grateful to Mrs. Dibley for having sisters in India, brothers in China, and a daughter requiring a liberal education. Never had Miss Monitor been so acquiescent. Now, if she would only leave the room, if some other opportune visitor would only arrive, so that she might speak in private to her new maid, and satisfy the intense curiosity she felt! But circumstances had apparently accommodated her on the present occasion as far as they intended to do. There was no further pretext for prolonging the interview, and Miss Monitor rose.

"At nine o'clock on Thursday," she said, "you will be here. Good afternoon."

Rose Dixon lowered her veil as soon as she had passed the

gate of Crescent House, and walked away rapidly to the right. A few hundred yards from the jealous brick wall and the great gates, a narrow road intersected the main thoroughfare. She glanced and then turned, down it, and in a few minutes came up with a woman who was loitering about in a purposeless manner. The woman was tall, of a gaunt figure and dowdy appearance; and she wore a brown silk gown, and a black shawl with a flounce of clumsy lace. Rose Dixon caught her arm, with a quick breath, almost a sob.

"Well?"

"I have seen her."

"Is it settled?"

"Yes."

"That's a good thing. What an infinite relief to my mind."

"Yes, Walter, it is, I know that; I grant that; and I like her face, and am sure I may trust her. But remember, though I am quite content to do anything to make things easier for you"—she looked at him with such troubled love in her eyes—"I do so hate, I do so shrink from this horrid deceit."

"Don't worry yourself on *that* score, dearest; it's *my* fault you know, not *yours*" (judicious and availing consolation for the woman who loved him!); "and, really, there's some fun in it too. Come, tell me all about it."

CHAPTER III.

REGINALD CLINT.

THE FIRS—as Mr. Clint's small estate was called, because one of its few beauties consisted of a thick belt of Scotch fir-trees, which effectually screened the house and grounds from the straight, monotonous high-road—was situated in a part of Hampshire which is not picturesque—a part in which there are few remnants of the old village-houses, with their quaint, small-paned windows and their red-tiled lichen-grown roofs; where pert, dull, pretentious, rubbishy little “villas” have sprung up along the iron roadway; where the soil is naturally sticky, and all the new paths are artificially blackened; where the roads are mended with rubble, and the ponds are green and ill-smelling. A dull, flat, coarse part of the country; and yet, even there, the summer was beautiful; and The Firs—a house which by no means redeemed the character of the neighbourhood, but was in harmony with it, being both dull and ugly—had lost some of its forbidding look, in the June sunshine, and surrounded by the thickly-leaved, bright green trees. These were only middling specimens, for Hampshire; but trees cannot help being beautiful, and no place in which they grow can be quite ugly.

The house—ingeniously placed and constructed, so that all the best rooms which were not exposed to the northern were exposed to the eastern aspect—was tasteless in design and hideous in colour; a rambling, straggling, comfortless house, with a large, neglected garden in the rear; a flat, scrubby lawn, on which cattle grazed up to within a few feet of the windows; and a dreary pond, the edges trampled by the

animals, lying blank and black on the borders of a belt of firs. Within that plantation, however, there were many glimpses of beauty to be had on that sixth day of June which was to witness Miriam Clint's reluctant return. A path, none the less picturesque because it was ill-kept, wound through the lines of brown and flame-coloured stems, all along the boundary of Mr. Clint's estate; a path bordered with rank tangled grass and wild flowers, with tender little twigs, untimely snapped, and drifted brown handfuls of last year's leaves, left there to cumber the ground, and lending their quota to the general effect of colour.

Along this path, the figure of a man was moving, some little time before the hour at which Miriam and her maid were "due" at the railway station nearest to The Firs. The figure was that of Mr. Clint, a large, tall man, a little over fifty years of age, who looked as if life and he had not been on good terms. His face, remarkably handsome in feature and form, wore an expression of morose and habitual ill-temper and discontent; and thereby accurately interpreted his customary moral condition. Reginald Clint was one of those persons who make their acquaintances (they never have friends) impatiently question the designs of Providence in their creation; by being intolerable to other people, and apparently unpleasant and unprofitable to themselves. What are they for? is a question which irresistibly presents itself to the observer in such cases. Here was a man who had never done a good, unselfish, large-hearted action, who had never made human lives happier; but, on the contrary, had contrived to render one human life miserable, and to mar two others to an extent which the future was destined to demonstrate; a man who had no redeeming qualities, not even those of his defects, and for whose unendurable temper and consummate unamiability circumstances were in nowise to blame.

He had plenty of money, derived from sure sources, and entirely within his own control; a fair position in society, *which, however, his odious disposition had marred, by causing*

everybody who could do so to withdraw from association with him ; and he had been protected from heart-sorrows by an arrangement of nature which left him without a heart to feel them. He was an ignorant, narrow, selfish, rude, discontented tyrant, who loved no one, but contrived to dislike a good many people with a bitterness which re-acted to his own discomfiture ; for, like all men of his disposition, he could not endure that those he designed to make his victims should be indifferent to him, or should escape him. No living creature loved him, no woman, child, nor dog—indeed, all animals sagaciously avoided him—and it is doubtful whether his splenetic nature did not hinder his self-love from affording him adequate satisfaction. There are self-complacent people who are self-sufficing, but there must go to the composition of them a spice of *bonhomie* which has no relation to benevolence—and in this Reginald Clint was utterly deficient.

From the neighbourhood he kept himself obstinately aloof—a benefit it was not slow to appreciate. He fulfilled none of the ordinary duties of a country gentleman, and he was cordially detested by all the people in his employment ; a very nomad population indeed, for no one would continue to work at The Firs, who had any chance of occupation elsewhere ; and the result was a badly-managed, half-productive estate, and a wretched, gloomy, ill-regulated house, shunned by all the families within visiting distance, and which had sinister repute in the adjacent villages as “unlucky.”

Reginald Clint was perfectly aware of his unpopularity, and, in his ill-conditioned way, rather liked it. He had no faculty for the enjoyment of society, and no intellect for the comprehension of its interests. He was not an absolutely uninstructed man ; he had gone through the routine of school and college ; but the information he had received in the process might as well have been packed into a trunk, and put away in a garret, for all the good it had done him. He knew nothing of politics, science, art, or literature ; his fellows had no interest for him ; his mind neither investigated the past nor speculated upon

the future. He was a mere handsome animal ; endowed, unfortunately, with the power of making human beings unhappy, of influencing their destiny ; and, without either mind or conscience fitted for the task, he possessed authority over two fine, ardent young natures, full of all the impulses and capabilities of youth, and on whom the great problems of life were just beginning to press.

If his son and daughter did not altogether hate him—and they did not—it certainly was not Reginald Clint's fault. That their mother had not hated him was one of those mysterious contradictions in human nature which will no doubt continue to baffle human intelligence as they have hitherto baffled it. Reginald Clint's wife had been dead so many years before the epoch at which the threads of her children's lives are taken up into this story, that there is hardly any room for her in it, but her death must needs count for one influence in the destiny of Walter and Miriam ; that death which, however it may have affected her children's future, nobody could have been so hard-hearted as to grudge to her. To our shallow perception, there are few respects in which Providence acts so unaccountably and so unsatisfactorily as in that of the selection of subjects for the interposition of death. In how many instances of unsuitable and unhappy marriages do the sufferers live to an old age, which would be enviable under other circumstances ; how frequently, when one of them is " taken," it is the wrong one !

In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Clint every sort of contradiction existed. Amy Desart was a bright, clever, lively girl when she made the terrible mistake of falling in love with Reginald Clint, and incurred the horrible misfortune of marrying him. Her brightness and liveliness were very evanescent ; they speedily yielded to his odious temper, and his truly infernal and ingenious tyranny ; but her love, with that provoking obstinate irrationality distinctive of the passion in women, *lasted* much longer. Probably, if it had not, she might have *lived* ; so that, after all, it was better for her that she was an

obstinate fool on this point, persisting in regarding a man who bullied her and worried her—ordered her about as if she had been a slave, swore at her as if she had been a hound, degraded her before her servants by his coarse contempt, who never was commonly civil, never was indeed anything but brutal to her—as an object of pity for his “unfortunate” temper, and in fostering his inclination to make her miserable by letting him see how thoroughly he had the power to do so.

Most people who knew Mr. and Mrs. Clint in the seven years during which she survived her marriage, held the opinion that the decease of Mr. Clint would be a decided advantage to his wife and children, and no loss to the world at large. Death did interpose at length, but it took the wrong person. It was that ever haunting question, “What is to become of the children?” which got the better of Amy Clint at last. She was the sort of woman to cherish hope, to cling to delusions about herself, her own future, the possibilities of her own fate, but she entertained none where her children were concerned. She was powerless enough, Heaven knew, in every respect; in this she was absolutely helpless. She could save herself to a certain extent from him, or she could do without being saved; but the children were victims on whose behalf she could do nothing. When Amy Clint, compelled to do so by her common sense, took it *into her heart* that there was no hope for her children, that they must inevitably be the victims of their father’s brutal temper, to their infinite misery and moral detriment, she speedily lost the power of endurance that had hitherto kept her up; and, in a curiously short space of time, she died—of sheer fear for her children, of sheer despair.

She was a great loss to her husband—a loss of which he was sensible every day. She had been the most complete and satisfactory victim with which fate had ever supplied him, and she was not to be replaced. He had, to be sure, tenants whom he could oppress, but they “took the law of him;” he had servants whom he could bully, but they went away; he had *animals whom he could ill-use*, but they were valuable, and

ill-treatment spoiled their value. His wife had neither gone away nor appealed to the law (which, indeed, would not have aided her in those days) ; and the more he had tormented her the more valuable she had become as a victim.

Of course he could have married again. His notoriously vile temper would not have counterbalanced his handsome face and his "comfortable" fortune in the estimation of young ladies, who, with wonderful irrationality, imagine that men will behave well to them who always behave ill to other people. But he did not tempt any one of his female acquaintances to this supreme evidence of folly and vanity. Perhaps the motive was a cautious doubt whether he might reasonably expect to find another woman so manageable as Amy had been ; perhaps he never really had a spark of inclination for any but her ; however that may be, Mr. Clint did not marry again. Nor did he ill-treat his children after the fashion, or to the extent, which their young mother had dreaded. In their very early years he neglected them shamefully, and when they came in his way he generally swore at them, and occasionally beat them, but at this point he received a lesson which availed. The nurses refused to remain in his service, and he found that result of his violence troublesome.

It is a fact that Reginald Clint was less intolerable after his wife's death than during her lifetime ; forced to restrain himself, for his own sake, by the removal of the one only individual in regard to whom a man enjoys absolute immunity. The children were passionately attached to one another, and neither exhibited the least resemblance to their father. Walter — who was sent early to school, and made friends for himself immediately—had much of the brightness, cleverness, and liveliness which had so soon been stamped out of his young mother ; but his nature lacked the patience, the firmness, and the high tone of hers. He was merry, indolent, changeable, affectionate, difficult to inspire with any lofty conviction or elevated motive, tricky—as every child who is capriciously or ill-treated inevitably becomes—mimetic, impulsive, and very good-looking,

though not so handsome as his father, or so uncommon in his appearance as his sister.

The brother and sister met only in their holidays for years. Miriam was sent to Miss Monitor's school in her tenth year, in consequence of the death of the housekeeper, who had given her a little elementary instruction. Long before, the child had come to appreciate her father's character; and though she did not then, or ever, actually hate him, she regarded him with contempt and distaste much stronger than the feelings entertained for him by Walter, whose nature had more softness and less intensity, and whom his father treated much worse. The fact was that Miriam had more character; she sometimes asserted herself; she sometimes carried a point by overt opposition against the gloomy tyrant; but Walter did not. He occasionally deceived his father; he never defeated him.

The caprice, which was as strongly characteristic of Reginald Clint's nature as was his tyranny, exhibited itself towards his son by his refusal to send him to a university, though the boy had been given to understand he was to go to Cambridge on leaving school. But his father changed his mood, which he called his mind, and kept Walter loitering in suspense and idleness at home, until a new cause of bitterness arose between them. Walter Clint was precisely qualified, by his pleasant surface talents, his good manners, and his good looks, to become popular in a country neighbourhood, where the general dislike inspired by his father did not prevent his making friends. This was gall and wormwood to the unhappy misanthrope of The Firs, and he punished his son for the high spirits which offended him, and the enjoyment which he could not prevent, by keeping him in uncertainty respecting his intentions with regard to him in the future, and by placing him in what he meant to be humiliating straits for want of money.

He would make him no regular allowance; he maintained an inquisitorial watch on his expenditure—though even in this respect he was capricious; and he took a savage pleasure in reminding his son that he was totally dependent on him, that

he had no "rights." The only thing for which Reginald Clint was ever heard to thank God was, that his father had made his money in trade, though he had chosen to invest it in land ; that it had no cursed penalties attached to its possession, so that he had the power of doing as he pleased with in ; not like those proud aristocrats who had to put up with the infernal impudence and extravagance of their sons : he called property on such terms a curse. Now, *his* was really property, for he could leave it to a hospital, or to a housemaid, if he chose ; and if his son and daughter dared to run counter to him, he bound himself to dispose of it in some such way, by the superfluous invocation of future penalties upon himself. The recipients of Mr. Clint's sentiments were, generally, his steward—he kept a large farm in his own hands—a retired attorney of no very brilliant repute, who was his nearest neighbour ; and Mr. Martin, the village doctor, whose professional services he needed rather frequently, but remunerated very grudgingly. Mr. Clint had taken to solitary drinking and excessive smoking—the latter at an early period ; the former since his wife's death, and for a long time without its being known even to his servants. As his temper and these habits were not calculated to promote his health, Mr. Martin was a tolerably frequent visitor at The Firs. He despised and disliked his unmanageable patient, and felt a genuine pity for Walter, for whom he would have gladly foreseen a speedy succession to that property, which, if Mr. Clint lived much longer, he considered it but too probable he would never enjoy.

"He always was a brute," thought Mr. Martin, on one particular occasion, when his interesting patient had been expatiating on the pleasure it afforded him to reflect that he could punish Walter for the crime of visiting at "that cursed old hypocrite's house"—he alluded to the pious and excellent vicar of the parish, the Rev. John Cooke—by leaving him a beggar. "He always was a brute, and he has been driving himself into extra brutality by drink for so long, that there's really no saying *where he may stop*—short of such madness as will enable us to

lock him up, I am afraid, but not short of the madness of disinheriting this boy, and driving that high-spirited girl Miriam, a far more dangerous person than her brother to ill-treat—to desperation. How I wish Walter could get away; that would be his best chance in the present and in the future. The life they lead is detestable; it is ruining the boy; and nothing would give him such a chance as absence.”

A few days later a violent quarrel occurred between the father and the son, and Walter left the house. Mr. Clint had been half drunk when the dispute arose: it was on the customary score of Walter's having friends in the neighbourhood whom his father did not choose to know; and his threats and violence of language had surpassed all the unfortunate young man's previous experience. Exhaustion and illness followed this horrible abandonment to the demon which possessed Mr. Clint, and Mr. Martin was sent for. That gentleman made good use of his opportunity; lowered his patient by medical treatment until he had no longer the physical power to be violent and abusive, frightened him by a grave and solemn warning that the penalty of indulging in drink and fury to a similar extent on a future occasion would probably be a sudden death—a warning at which Mr. Clint, if he had not been prostrate under the effect of physic, would simply have sneered—and then cautiously approached the subject of his future relations with his son.

That he should declare he did not care what became of the cursed blackguard, did not surprise or move Mr. Martin; but when Mr. Clint added that he might go whither he pleased, provided he did not enter *his* house again, the doctor saw his way. The details of the negotiation which he undertook in sheer kindness of heart, and because the condition of affairs at The Firs was inexpressibly shocking to his sense of decency and propriety, need not be recapitulated here. He had to manage the son as well as the father, and Walter was not the easiest of subjects when it was a question of inducing him to apply himself to the task of embracing a career in life. Mr. Martin did,

however, achieve a sort of success. Mr. Clint agreed to allow his son a sufficient sum to enable him to live in lodgings in London, and study medicine, the only profession which he could be induced to learn, but which he ardently hoped he might in the future be saved from the necessity of practising.

Mr. Martin gave Walter some introductions to former friends of his own, and the young man began his new life. All this miserable history had been very imperfectly made known to Miriam ; but she understood how bitter her father's feeling towards his only son was, and how sternly he was bent on gratifying it, when, just a year before the episode of the candidate for the lady's-maid's place occurred, Miss Monitor received peremptory instructions from Mr. Clint that Miriam was not to be permitted to see her brother, under any pretext whatever. During the ensuing Christmas vacation, when Miriam passed a dreary fortnight at The Firs, she had made a courageous attempt to induce her father to rescind the sentence of her brother's banishment ; but in vain ; and she had been forced to console herself with a hope that, on her final return home, the now existing unnatural state of things would come to an end. It was not unbecoming vanity which led a handsome clever girl like Miriam to believe that her constant presence must win over her father ; but Miriam had not been sufficiently with him to thoroughly understand Reginald Clint.

CHAPTER IV.

WALTER'S TRUST.

To and fro along the path in the plantation of firs, walked Reginald Clint, so passing the time away, until he should have to go to the station at Drington to fetch his daughter. He was not more amiably disposed than usual. Miriam's brief and easily quelled attempt at opposition had irritated him, coming as it did after he had, with difficulty, made up his mind to having her permanently at home. He had not been hurt at the evidence conveyed in her request of the nature of his daughter's feelings; he had no tenderness for her, and he would have sneered at the idea of her being supposed to entertain any for him; but she had ventured to question a decision of his, and that was not to be endured. She must understand that such opposition must never again be made or contemplated. The permanent institution of a woman in his house who might be bullied *ad libitum*, had long been wanting to the existence of Reginald Clint. Perhaps he did not go quite so far as to deliberately regard his daughter's return as a remedy for this deficiency, but his frame of mind was as decidedly menacing to Miriam's future comfort as it could be, as he turned into the road through a gate in the low external wall on the far side of the fir plantation, and strode away in the direction of Drington.

When he reached the railway station, Mr. Clint looked sharply about him. He had ordered a dog-cart, the only equipage The Firs boasted, to be in attendance on the arrival of the *train*, and he was almost provoked when he saw it there,

and also a hand-cart for the conveyance of Miriam's luggage. Here was an opportunity for swearing at the groom lost. The approach of the train was already indicated by a puff of smoke in the distance, and Mr. Clint passed at once through the booking-office to the arrival platform. As the train came up, Miriam's handsome head was put out of her carriage-window; and she nodded and kissed her hand to her father, who stood stolidly still, his hands in his pockets, until the carriage was alongside the platform.

"Dear papa," said Miriam, as she jumped lightly out—she had been making very good resolutions on the way—"how good of you to come and meet me yourself!"

He neither kissed her nor looked at her. "Where are your things?" he said. "Where's your maid?"

"Those are my boxes they're taking out of the van," said Miriam, trying not to seem taken aback at this strange welcome home; "and my maid is here." She turned towards Rose Dixon, who stood behind her, with a travelling-bag in one hand, and shawls over her arm.

"See to your mistress's things," said Mr. Clint; "there's a hand-cart and a man just outside the gate, to bring them up to The Firs; he'll show you the way.—Come along, Miriam;" he walked abruptly away, and his daughter followed him, to the dog-cart.

"Jump in," he said, and took her almost roughly by the elbow. She did so, and he got in beside her, and took the reins.

"How is she to get home? Must she walk?" asked Miriam.

"The woman? Oh, yes. There's no room for her here.—That will do, Wilkins; let him go!"

He started the horse; the man jumped up behind, and they were off.

"I'm afraid she will be very tired," said Miriam timidly; "It's a hot day, and after the journey—"

"*What cursed nonsense!*" said her father, violently. "I

hope you and Miss Monitor have not been such fools as to hire a maid who can't use her limbs, and requires the treatment of a fine lady. By George, she won't get it at the Firs! She looks a poor, pale, frightened creature. I hate sick servants; and mind, I tell you, Miriam, if you've brought one here, she shall be sent packing."

"I don't think Rose Dixon is at all sickly, sir," Miriam hastened to say: she was frightened at the thought of how powerless to help Walter her father's caprice might make her at any moment. "She is not even delicate, she tells me. Only, she is not a common person in either appearance or manner—and—"

Her further explanation was cut short by her father's pulling the horse up. The animal had picked up a stone, and in the necessary objurgations upon him for doing so, and upon the groom for not being sufficiently quick in removing it, the matter dropped. As they started again, Miriam glanced back at the station: a man was pushing the hand-cart, with a pile of boxes, through the side-gate, and Rose was walking along the footpath, a little in front. In another minute the road turned, and Miriam lost sight of her. The incident was small in itself, but so like the experience and the forebodings which the girl was bringing to her home, that it overcame all her resolutions. She could not rally her spirits, she could not force herself to assume the lively and confident air by which she had proposed to herself to secure an easy position, as by a *coup-de-main*; she sat by her father's side silent, and hardly heeding the summer landscape through which they drove. When the entrance to the Firs lay close before them, she roused herself, and said, "I hope you are glad to see me, papa? You have not said so."

"I never make speeches about matters of course," was Reginald Clint's congenial reply. Miriam said no more. Her father pulled up at the entrance to the house, helped her out of the dog-cart, and strode into the hall before her, going

straight to his "study," in which he never read, but sulked, drank, and smoked a good deal. A man-servant, a stranger to Miriam, appeared. She told him briefly that her maid was coming, and desired she might be sent to her; then ran upstairs to the room which had been her mother's, which she had called her own since her childhood, and locked the outer door. Then she flung herself on the bed, in the inner room, and burst into tears not all caused by grief; anger and fear had a large share in their origin.

"I shall never be able to make it better," she muttered, "and if he sends Rose away, it will be worse. The only thing I have to hope for, the only thing I can look forward to, is to get away, and there's only one way of doing that. I'll take that only way, then, the first time I can get it, at any price; nothing can be so bad as home and my father."

She got off the bed when her tears subsided, and walked from one room to the other. No preparations had been made for her return; none of the prettiness of a modern young lady's dwelling cheered the dull, old-fashioned room. There were no flowers, no bright hangings, no draped mirrors or pretty bookcases—none of the things which mothers provide for the daughters who are coming home to them "for good," and which most fathers would cause to be provided for a motherless girl. Miriam had not expected any preparation, and yet the dull, ugly room vexed her. The reception by her father, the silent drive home, the tumult of her feelings, had driven into the background the curiosity which she had been experiencing to a painfully exciting pitch, during the last two days. She had almost forgotten that as yet she had not discovered her brother's motive in inducing her to engage Rose Dixon, that as yet she did not know who her maid really was.

Rose Dixon had punctually presented herself at the appointed time at Crescent House, Hampstead, and had easily and correctly assumed the functions of Miss Clint's maid. But *there had not been* a moment's opportunity for Miriam

to speak to her new attendant unheard; the "girls," the teachers, and the servants all swarmed about the popular pupil up to the instant of her departure, and Miss Monitor accompanied her to the station. Miriam observed traces of tears on Rose Dixon's face, and there was a nervous flutter about her, which made her young mistress kindly anxious to reassure her, and to shield her from observation. The station was crowded on their arrival, and the noise and confusion were sufficiently distracting to render Miss Monitor's recognition of one figure among the crowd improbable. While that lady was taking two first-class tickets for her ex-pupil and her maid, and making the guard sensible of the propriety of securing seats for them in a carriage with other ladies, a tall woman in a brown silk gown contrived to hover near them, and to press a hand of each unseen.

The journey inflicted a severe trial of patience on Miriam. The carriage had three occupants in addition to herself and Rose Dixon. One was a very fine lady indeed, who signified, as plainly as look and gesture could convey the sentiment, that she objected to the presence of Rose; the other two were giggling girls of less than Miriam's own age, and they watched her with the artless and ill-bred curiosity of their time of life. She had not a chance of exchanging a word, on any but ordinary topics, with Rose Dixon, during the journey; and she had been much surprised when, in answer to her whispered question, "Have you brought me any letter from my brother?" Rose answered "No."

The windows of Miriam's rooms were in front of the house, so that she saw Rose Dixon coming along the avenue, by the side of the hand-cart with her luggage. She looked heated and tired, and Miriam longed to run downstairs and save her from carrying any burden up to her room, but she wisely restrained the impulse. Presently, there was a knock at the door; Miriam unlocked and threw it open. There stood Rose, deadly pale and trembling, and looking as if she was *going to faint*; while the housemaid, a grinning large-faced

Hampshire girl, who had come upstairs to show her the way, started at her in wholly unsympathetic surprise.

"How tired you are!" said Miriam, as she took the travelling-bag from Rose.—"That will do," addressing the housemaid, against whom she unceremoniously shut and locked the door. Then, for the first time, the two young women confronted one another alone. Miriam had thrown aside her bonnet and shawl, and was a picture of mingled excitement, discontent, and curiosity. Her dark hair was dusty and disordered; her cheeks were smeared with tears; her beautiful eyes were bright, troubled, and pitiful; her strong tall form was shaken with the conflicting feelings within her. Rose was pale to her lips, and looked faint, but she was perfectly calm. Pain was plainly to be read in her face, but there was courage there too, and something that told that the habit of endurance was formed in her character.

"Sit down," said Miriam, pulling a chair forward, and pushing Rose Dixon into it; then standing before her with a hand on each of her shoulders, she looked into her face. "I cannot bear this one instant longer. Walter promised to explain—he has not done it; you must. Who are you? What are you to him?"

Rose Dixon put her hands up, and gently took Miriam's off her shoulders; then holding them in hers, she answered, as they, thus at arm's length, looked at each other, "He left it to me to tell you. I am your brother's wife!"

Miriam merely gasped. In the extremity of her astonishment she was quite unable to speak. In one brief moment, all the import, all the consequences, of this revelation rushed into her mind. The implacable fury of her father, in the event of a discovery; the risk of the position Rose had undertaken; even the complicated awkwardness of the relation towards the household in which she was involved—the whole concatenation presented itself at once to her keen intelligence, and interpreted itself by the deep frown which instantly set itself upon her brow.

"It was not my doing that you were deceived, Miss Clint," said Rose, dropping Miriam's hands, and rising. "I entreated Walter to tell you the truth, and leave you to choose whether you would protect and shelter me, knowing who I am."

"His wife!—his wife!" was all Miriam could yet say.

"Yes, his wife! You surely do not doubt that? If you do, I can prove it. Surely he told you there could be no harm to you, no disgrace in having me with you?"

"He did, he did!" said Miriam, recovering herself, and passing her hand over her forehead. "I do not doubt your word, but—but I am so bewildered—you will explain—you will tell me. Good heavens! this may be a dreadful thing for Walter." She spoke the last sentence, almost unconscious that she was heard.

"Yes," said Rose, and tears rolled down her pale face, "it may be a dreadful thing for Walter, and I fear, I fear, his plan has not been a wise one, but I could not dissuade him from it. He dreaded leaving me quite alone; he clung to the idea of your affording me protection. Believe me, Miss Clint, my assent was most unwilling; I shrunk from asking so much from you; but Walter said you would not blame him for marrying the woman he loved, only because she was poor."

"Nor would I," thought Miriam, "though I am not sentimental, and would not marry a poor man, no matter how much I loved him; but I do blame him; I cannot forgive him for marrying a servant." In that fact she felt there was utter ruin for her brother, even apart from any vindictive course which his discovery of it might cause her father to adopt. Her silence chilled and terrified Rose.

"Oh," she sobbed, "I wish I had not obeyed him!—I wish I had refused to do this! It must end ill. I will go away; I will tell him it cannot be."

"No, no," said Miriam; "do not distress yourself so much. You must remember how utterly I am taken by surprise; you must give me time to get over the first shock of this news."

little. You do not know my father ; I don't think Walter can have made you understand how proud a man he is, and—”

Rose flushed scarlet. She perceived what was in Miriam's mind. “Miss Clint,” she said, “I think you have not quite understood me. Your brother has done a dreadfully imprudent thing in marrying me—I did not understand how imprudent, or I hope I should have had the courage to save him by parting from him ; but he has only married a poor girl, not one inferior to him in birth and breeding.”

“What ?” cried Miriam, impetuously seizing hold of her. “You don't mean to say—though you certainly look like it—that you are a lady ?”

“Certainly I do,” returned the other calmly, and with decision. “I am a lady—by descent, by birth, and education. I don't think Walter would have married any one who was not so,” she added proudly ; “and I don't think his sister ought to have suspected him of such a thing.”

“Now I don't mind it a bit,” said Miriam, as she hugged Rose with all the warmth of her impulsive repentance ; “and I see I must have been a fool not to understand it. Never mind your not having any money ; neither has Walter, you know. But never fear ; we shall contrive to manage papa somehow ; and if we don't, some day I mean to have enough for us all. Only, how, in the name of wonder, could you ever think of pretending to be a servant ? How could you imagine such a thing ?”

“It was Walter's plan,” said Rose ; “but I knew I could carry it out, from what he had told me of you. I am perfectly competent to be your maid, Miss Clint, as you shall see.”

“Absurd ! How can you talk such nonsense ? Walter's wife, my own sister-in-law, my maid ; my father's daughter-in-law, a servant in his house ! Of course such a thing is quite out of the question. Only, what are we to say to papa ? How am I to account for you ?” Miriam began to walk about the room, and to pull her long hair through her fingers, as she had *a habit of doing* when she was troubled. Rose quietly laid

aside her bonnet and shawl, opened one of the travelling-bags, took out combs and brushes, laid them on the dressing-table, placed a chair before it, and stood with her hands on the chair-back, looking steadily at Miriam.

"In twenty minutes dinner will be served," she said, "and you must go down and dine with your father. You have promised Walter to befriend me. You cannot betray me yet, and in the meantime the only thing to be done is to let me play my part so as not to be suspected. This evening, you shall know all, and then you shall take your resolution. What you can do for me and for him now, is to let me dress you for dinner, and then to go down with an untroubled face: when you can leave your father, you shall find me here."

"But you?" said Miriam. "What are you to do? You cannot dine with the servants. It is an impossible position to maintain."

"No, it isn't," said Rose. "Sit down, and let me do your hair." Miriam obeyed her mechanically.

Rose gathered up the shining tresses in her hand, admiringly, and began to brush them out. "I shall ask the servants to let me have some tea up here, on the pretext of having to put your things in order, and to-night we can arrange for the future."

The quiet, gentle, blue-eyed little woman was subjugating Miriam by the simple strength of her purpose.

Miriam's first dinner in her father's house, as a young lady come home "for good," must always have had some importance for her, but she had little contemplated its being such an ordeal. As she sat opposite to her father, she could hardly preserve her composure, or pretend to eat, so oppressed was she with the secret she had just learned; and with the recollection of what Walter had said about one request he had it in contemplation to make of his father through her. She had never felt so much afraid of her father as now, when she needed to be least so. She was tired, worn out, and for the first time in her life bearing the burden of conceal-

ment. Mr. Clint was in a somewhat better humour than before, and occasionally spoke to her almost graciously. At the conclusion of dinner, he noticed her look of fatigue, and told her she might retire at once, if she pleased, adding that she need never trouble herself about him in the evenings—he rarely entered the drawing-room. Miriam, even then, could think of the dreary evenings there must be in store for her, and wonder whether he had any notion of procuring companionship of any kind for her; but she made no comment, only rose to leave the room. She stood hesitating for a moment whether she should approach him, but he dismissed her with a nod, and a curt “good-night.”

Miriam ran impatiently up the stairs, to her own rooms, where she found Rose, seated in a thoughtful attitude by an open window, looking out upon the dreary lawn, where sheep were nibbling the grass, their short sharp bites distinctly audible in the still summer evening.

“That’s over,” said Miriam, “and now we shall not be disturbed again to-night.” She drew a low chair to the side of Rose as she spoke, and seated herself, looking up into the sad face of her brother’s wife.

“If Walter could only see us now,” she said, “he would be well pleased. We have some peaceful hours before us, come what may. You will tell me everything now?”

“Everything.”

“May I ask you questions?”

“Ask me what you will.”

“Then tell me, how long have you known Walter? When were you married to him?”

“I have known him two years; we have been married one.”

“Was Rose Dixon your real name?”

“No; my real name was Florence Reeve; but Walter would not let me use it; he fears it may already have reached your father’s ears. Rose Dixon was my mother’s name,”

“I shall call you Florence, when we are alone, and you *must call me Miriam.*”

"No, no," said the other earnestly; it would be very dangerous. People pronounce names almost unconsciously, and we cannot be enough on our guard."

"Very well," said Miriam; "I believe you are right. You shall be Rose, and I will be Miss Clint."

"I wonder if you will ever like me well enough to be reconciled to having granted Walter's request?" said Rose.

"I think I shall like you very much," replied Miriam frankly; "only, I am surprised now, so dumbfounded, I do not feel rightly awake, and am hardly able to understand you."

"I shall be lonely and desolate indeed, if you do not like me," said Rose nervously, and with trembling lips, "for Heaven knows when I shall see Walter again."

"What do you mean? Have you no plan for meeting?"

"He and I parted yesterday—but for the momentary glimpse of him this morning," said Rose, "that also he left for me to tell you. He does not purpose to see either you or me again. He is going, in a fortnight, to California."

CHAPTER V.

FLORENCE.

WHEN Mr. Martin advised Walter Clint to adopt the study of medicine, he did so without any conviction that a future medical benefactor to his species was hidden under the good-looking exterior of his unmanageable patient's mutinous son. That Walter would be better behaved anywhere than at home, Mr. Martin was quite justified in believing; he had had opportunities of observing the lad, and knew that he was hardly to be recognized when removed from the grinding restraint of his father's presence; and it was quite evident he must have something to do. Mr. Clint would assuredly not give him a roving commission, with money enough to make it pleasant. But his experienced friend did not expect Walter to make much of his medical studies, and he by no means outran that modest expectation. Walter was not exactly idle during the ensuing year, but his occupations were not strictly conducive to his future welfare.

The house in which Walter Clint lodged was a dull, grimly genteel, thin house, in an old-fashioned crescent in the Bloomsbury district. It had a large street door, surmounted by a dusty semicircle of glass, and decorated with a plaster cast of a horse of the rampant order; and a floor-clothed hall, dingy and dull, but at least possessing the advantage of space. The rooms were numerous, and not ill-furnished; but every article in them was old-fashioned, and though well preserved up to a certain point, had evidently begun to yield to time. Walter occupied two rooms on the ground-floor, which had

been the dining-room and study ; but that was in the time of Mrs. Reeve's predecessor, a lawyer in good practice, and of convivial habits ; they were parlour and bed-room now.

Walter had been lodging in the dull house in the dull crescent for some three or four weeks before he became aware that the proprietress of the mansion lived in it. He had speedily perceived that the domestic staff was insufficient in numbers—it consisted of one maid-servant and a boy, and everything which could possibly be omitted was left undone ; but he had never expected much comfort in a London lodging-house, and if he had less than he expected, he was of a temperament to make light of the disappointment. That the drawing-rooms were let to two elderly maiden ladies, who enjoyed the luxury of a servant of their own, Walter was aware—indeed, the proximity of his bedroom to the kitchen-stairs enabled him to hear all the quarrels and most of the confidences between Mrs. Reeve's Martha and the Misses Ray's Mary Jane—but he had no notion how the remaining rooms were distributed and occupied.

He was not much at home. The acquaintances he had made through Mr. Martin's introduction were speedily supplemented by others, made by himself ; and Walter was soon in the easily-descending groove of a medical student's life in London, with the added temptation and danger that he did not know, for certain, whether he should ever be forced to earn a guinea for himself, on pain of going without it. Among these acquaintances, there were some far from desirable, and Walter was "easily led," as the phrase which thus ingeniously palliates that fatal defect, weakness of character, has it. It would be neither profitable nor pleasant to follow the exact course of his experiences of London and student life ; for they were of a kind to foster his faults, and leave his good qualities dormant. His entire separation from his sister was highly injurious to Walter. The decree which effected this was pronounced by Mr. Clint, after Walter had been one year in London, and when he had

further embittered his father against him by considerably exceeding his allowance, and making application for money in a free-and-easy style. Mr. Clint, clinging to his favourite theory, that his son had no rights, and all he chose to do for him was of his own free grace, resented this as a double injury—to his theory, and his pocket. This was terribly unjust, for it inflicted misery upon Miriam, who had not deserved it, and whose strongest feeling was affection for her brother, and it diminished the motive which actuated them both to endeavour to keep on decent terms with their father. But Mr. Clint was not to be influenced by any such considerations.

After Walter had been some time in London, and when, if there had been any one interested in him to notice it, that individual would have perceived a considerable decline in steadiness on his part, an occurrence took place which, though trifling in itself, was destined to exert a grave influence on his future life. He was dawdling over a late breakfast in a sullen and discontented mood one fine spring morning, when a cab stopped at the house-door, a lady stepped out and rang the bell, and a cabman, insolent-looking beyond the ordinary appearance of his tribe, hauled down a box of by no means imposing dimensions, flung it on the pavement, and apostrophised the "fare" in a loud tone and exceedingly bad language, as Walter heard distinctly through the open window. In a moment he had forestalled the servant, opened the door, and confronted the cabman, who moderated his tone with surprising celerity. It was the usual case—a lady, alone, and to all appearance not rich. Of course, a London cabman must overcharge and bully her.

"Pray, go into the house," said Walter to the lady, "and I will settle this matter." He did so by the comforting assurance to the cabman that he should be promptly served with a summons, and made to pay for the luxury of insulting a lady. He then took up the box and carried it into the hall, where he found the "fare," who had by this time been joined by the *servant*.

"Thank you, very much," said the lady, who was very young and exceedingly pretty, and whose tearful blue eyes and flushed cheeks inspired Walter with mingled emotions of admiration and anger. "I am so sorry to have given you so much trouble."

"Not the least trouble," said Walter. "I am so glad I was in the way—I seldom am at this time of day. That insolent brute had time to frighten you as it was, I am afraid."

"I was startled. It is the first time I have travelled alone in England."

"Ah!" said Walter significantly. "Ladies are better looked after abroad, even when they don't travel with maids and footmen. Now, where shall I put this box for you?"

"Thank you; pray don't mind it. The boy will take it upstairs presently."

"Upstairs!" thought Walter. "Is she going to stay here? Can this blue-eyed creature have come on a visit to the old maids in the drawing-rooms? Are they going to treat her to Exeter Hall and oratorios?"

It was impossible to ask her any questions—impossible to do anything but bow, and retire to the shelter of his own parlour, whence he watched her, through a good-sized chink in the door, as she went up the wide stair.

"What a pretty girl!" Walter thought, as he walked up and down his sitting-room, with his hands in his pockets; "and a little lady too. Who is she, I wonder? Presently he heard the voice of Mrs. Reeve's Martha directing the boy to carry "Miss Florence's" box upstairs "to the dressing-room." The youth began to drag his burden up the staircase, inflicting much damage on the already dingy and ancient carpet in the process; and Walter called Martha into the parlour, on the pretext of wanting to have his breakfast-things removed.

It was not very difficult to extract information from Martha: she was endowed with a powerful capacity for gossip; and in the course of a few minutes, Walter was placed in possession of all she *knew* concerning her mistress and her affairs, and of a

good deal which she only guessed. The story was an ordinary one. Mrs. Reeve was the widow of a clergyman, who had never attained to any kind of distinction, but had died, after many years of unrecognized hard work in London, leaving her with an only child, and a very small annuity, to purchase at the cost of severe sacrifices. Some time after his death, Mrs. Reeve took the dull house in the dull crescent to which fate had sent Walter, by the advice of some distant relatives, who promised to secure a respectable connexion for her, and who did so for some time, during which she received only ladies as lodgers. But the connexion had dropped off, as the neighbourhood became more and more unfashionable, and sometimes the rooms stood empty for an alarmingly long period. Then Mrs. Reeve relented, and let to very-well-recommended gentlemen, of which privileged number Walter was one.

Mrs. Reeve's only child was growing up during the earlier, comparatively prosperous period, and receiving from her delicate highly-cultivated mother, a thoroughly sound and useful education. Florence was pretty, clever, and good, with an affectionate, yielding disposition; and her mother loved her with exceeding love and pride. For her child she was ambitious, as she had never been for herself; for her child she was discontented, though for herself she had borne ill-fortune with smiling readiness. Florence had a stronger will than her mother's, and when she saw that something more than what they were doing must be done to keep them out of debt, in which there evidently would be ruin, she made up her mind what that something was, and made arrangements for doing it.

Florence Reeve's eighteenth birthday found her settled as resident governess in the family of a clergyman, formerly a friend of her father, but to whom "life had been dealt in another measure," where she was kindly treated, and whither her mother was occasionally invited to pass a few days with her, when she could get away from her house and its fluctuating, but always exacting, inmates. For one year this arrangement *worked well*, but then Mrs. Reeve's health began to fail, and

she concealed the fact from Florence. Disorder and mismanagement in the house ensued, and the misfortune which above all Florence had dreaded befell the widow—she got into debt.

That word has such various significations ! It has quite a splendid sound in the case of the hereditary possessors of large estates, in which it merely signifies vice, selfishness, hideous unscrupulousness, and the ignoring of every duty and obligation, only in virtue of whose strict fulfilment society ought to tolerate the tremendous inequality between these people's lives and those of their fellow-men. It is dashing when it means fortune and reputation squandered by titled fools, or by women without one feminine virtue or intellectual attribute, in the pursuit of sickening sensuality, and vapid, vulgar folly ; but it has neither splendour nor dash about it in the more prosaic case of poor, struggling people, who are merely honest and unfortunate—people who feel debt an ever-present burden and an urgent disgrace. Mrs. Reeve was one of these. She did her best ; she saved and spared, she overtaxed her strength, and concealed her anxieties and her illness from Florence, until she broke down completely, and was forced to send for her daughter by sheer inability to attend to the house any longer. Walter had never spoken to Mrs. Reeve ; he was rarely in his rooms in the evenings, and had been less than ever in them of late. He had known nothing more of her than that she existed, and lived upstairs, somewhere above the drawing-rooms, and that she had once written him a timid and deprecatory kind of note, in which she entreated him not to smoke in the parlour with the door open, because the ladies in the drawing-rooms objected to the smell of tobacco, especially in the form of cigars. Walter was a good-natured, easy-going young fellow, not in the least brutal, and so he did not curse Mrs. Reeve's impudence, and the ladies in the drawing-rooms, and decline to consult the convenience of a parcel of women, but he returned a polite answer, and attended to the request.

This little circumstance had inspired Mrs. Reeve with a favourable opinion of her lodger in the parlour; and he had won a place in Martha's good graces also by his good-humoured readiness to put up with her deficiencies, and his considerate chariness about ringing his bell. She was quite ready to talk to him about "Missus" and Miss Florence, and frankly expressed her opinion that Mrs. Reeve was in a very bad way, and Miss Florence had not come home too soon. Martha concluded by declaring a total want of confidence in doctors, though, she remarked, she ought not to say that to Mr. Clint. Walter assured her she was not insulting the learned faculty in his person, as he was not a doctor yet. Presently he went out, feeling a good deal of curiosity about "Miss Florence," wondering when he should see her again (soon, he thought, considering they were living under the same roof), and whether she would bow or speak to him when they met.

His curiosity and his doubts were speedily satisfied.

During the whole of the next day, he did not see the blue-eyed stranger, though he went out later and came in earlier, with a vague hope of doing so. But he inquired of Martha how Mrs. Reeve was, and whether her daughter was alarmed about her. He learned that the doctor, in whom Martha declined to believe, had seen his patient, and pronounced her very weak; and that Martha's conviction was, he knew nothing about it. "Her illness is perry—something, he says—I don't rightly know the word," continued Martha; "but I don't think much of that. It's worry as really ails her; and, ah! dear me what a many people die of worry, which the doctors calls it long names."

It was past midnight when Walter let himself in with his key, and was surprised to find the gas-light in the hall still burning, and to hear sounds of moving about. "The old ladies have broken out, I suppose," he thought, "turned convivial;" and he went towards the head of the kitchen-stairs to inquire *whether, under these unusual circumstances, he was to put the*

chain up, but was arrested by a swift footstep on the stairs, and a voice calling to him, "Mr. Clint! Mr. Clint!"

The step and the voice belonged to Florence Reeve, who informed him that her mother had been suddenly seized with alarming symptoms half an hour before—that Martha had been sent to fetch the doctor; in the meantime, Mrs. Reeve had become apparently insensible, and she and the Misses Ray had vainly endeavoured to restore her—that Martha had told her Mr. Clint was a doctor; and she begged him to come with her to her mother's room. Before she had said half this, they were going upstairs side by side, and Walter noticed that, though her face was white with fear, Florence Reeve was quite self-possessed. There was no childish terror in her manner; she shed no tears; and when they reached her mother's room, she obeyed his directions with quiet promptitude.

The room was large, but scantily furnished, and comfortless. An old-fashioned four-post bedstead, upon which Mrs. Reeve lay, faced the windows. Her wan face and pinched features looked ghastly in the light of the candles. The Misses Ray were standing at the foot of the bed, looking on helplessly; and when Florence and Walter entered the room, they promptly retired, under the impression that the doctor had arrived. Thus, the young man and the girl found themselves alone, in the dead of the night, in the presence of what? Sleep? Insensibility? No; Walter knew it at once; he was not mistaken, though he gave prompt instructions, which he knew must be unavailing, in order to gain time until the doctor and the servant should be on the spot. They were in the presence of death. Suddenly, quietly, unsuspected, the summons had come to the citadel, and the surrender had been as sudden. For a few minutes, Florence was deceived; but, as she bathed her mother's forehead with vinegar, something in the way the head turned under her hand gave her a sickening sensation of fear. The sponge dropped, she stood upright, her horrified eyes

turned to Walter. "Good God!" she whispered "can she be dead?"

He took her hand, and placed her gently in a chair; she let him move her, she felt helpless and weak as an infant. "Try to bear it," he said very gently; "I fear she is."

When Martha came back with the doctor, she found Florence sitting by her mother's death-bed, stupefied, her hands clasped before her eyes, and Walter kneeling silently at her side.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EXCEEDINGLY YOUNG COUPLE.

THE friendlessness of some poor "genteel" people is a curious thing to contemplate. We do not know or understand it in ordinary circumstances, but when unusual incidents occur, it comes out in a very impressive way. There are people who occupy their own little grooves, do their own little work, carry their own by no means light or little crosses, and who, when the even tenor of their not too easy way is interrupted, and it becomes necessary for themselves, or other people, to muster their resources, do not appear to have anybody belonging to them or to whom they belong. Mrs. Reeve was one of this numerous class. She had lived for many years far removed from her never numerous early associations, and her life had had too much toil, care, and anxiety in it to admit of the formation of new ones, even had she not been a reserved and silent person.

Thus, it came to pass that, when her sudden death obliged her daughter to look about her for friends and counsellors, she found none, except the clergyman and his family, from whose house she had returned so short a time before that terrible event. But her friendlessness did not appal Florence. There was a period of overwhelming grief, and then one of painful investigation, bewilderment, utterly strange business; the looking into her mother's affairs; the definition of the interval which lay between her and destitution. The affairs were simple; the interval was short. When the lease of the dull house in the dull crescent had been sold, and the furniture was *disposed of*, at a valuation, to the incoming tenant, who

also proposed to let lodgings, and who agreed to engage Martha, and to accept Mr. Clint as a tenant for the parlours; when all the debts, which had so harassed her mother, and which had been so dreaded by Florence, were paid, there remained one hundred pounds. One hundred pounds in the world; a dangerously fair face for any unprotected homeless girl to possess; and the chance that her former employers would take her into their service again! These were Florence Reeve's actual and prospective circumstances; and yet she did not feel friendless, she was not afraid, she was not miserable. She hardly knew how everything had been arranged. The doctor had been very kind, and Walter. She could not understand how it was that Walter seemed like an old friend all at once—but so it was; ever after that dreadful day it had come quite naturally to her to tell him everything, and take his advice. She had no relatives to take her to task, or friends to comment upon her, because she talked freely with a young man who was not a relative; and she was satisfied, in her innocent frankness, that she needed no other friend than this one, who might so easily have been a wolf in sheep's clothing, discernible only by the keen-eyed trappers of society, in whose experience fleece-bedecked wolves are not rare. He might so easily have been!—but he was not. Florence first trusted him, and very soon she loved him with all the strength and singleness of a finely-tempered feminine nature. She did not love him, or, at least, she did not tell herself she loved him, as soon as he loved her, and unceasingly assured himself of the fact. He had loved her from the hour in which he had been obliged to tell her the truth, that her mother was dead; and he had gratitude and grace sufficient to recognize, with a curious sad humility, not so uncommon in men as women believe it to be, that this love, all unpropitious as were the external circumstances connected with it, was a saving influence, a turning-point in his life.

The position was a very serious one, and, for the first time, Walter felt he had erred in failing to conciliate his father.

For Florence's sake, he would now have made any sacrifice, would have stooped to any concession, but it was too late for sacrifice or concession to avail. The fancied grievances of his life at the Firs had been so supplemented by the real irregularities of his conduct in London, as to render his father's estrangement complete. There was nothing for Walter but to discard all remembrance of his expectations, to live strictly upon his allowance, and go in seriously for his profession and a long engagement. At all events, he would not be wronging Florence by inducing her to consent to this ; she had no prospect on which this would not be an improvement. He consulted her upon the point, but did not let her discover that any risk to his own future was involved in such an arrangement. He had too clear a perception of her disinterestedness and generosity to enable her to refuse him on the plea of its being done for his sake. He represented himself hopelessly alienated from home-ties, and as absolutely friendless, and, in that sense, independent as herself. Florence heard him with pure and perfect joy. Never was there a prettier or more imprudent love-story than theirs. They parted solemnly pledged to each other ; she to return to her pupils at Windsor ; he to resume his medical studies—which presented themselves now under a very different aspect, and inspired him with quite other feelings.

Florence was very happy, notwithstanding the real grief with which she mourned her mother. Sorrow was strong ; but love, the stronger, had come in and conquered. She had left Mr. Clewer's house a pretty, bright, gladsome, timid girl, a charming companion and playfellow for her young pupils ; she returned to it, a very lovely young woman, her beauty marvellously enhanced, her manner tinged with new dignity, and over her person and demeanour a certain nameless tender grace diffused, lending her an added charm, which induced Mrs. Clewer's "particular friend," Mrs. Dunville, to inform that lady, confidentially, that she considered Miss Reeve "unsafe."

"Unsafe !" exclaimed Mrs. Clewer, unconscious of her

sagacious friend's meaning. "Unsafe how? Unsafe to whom?"

"Well, my dear—I don't mean to alarm you, you know: but your Percy is very young—and those things do happen," said Mrs. Dunville.

"Oh, Percy!" and Mrs. Clewer looked rather red and uncomfortable: "he is a mere boy, you know; and I shall take care to keep her out of his way."

Mrs. Dunville said no more; but she had always had her doubts of dear Helen's common sense, and now they were confirmed. None but a fool could have made such an answer to such a warning.

Mrs. Clewer's eldest son came home from college when Florence had been six months his sisters' governess. Her pupils were still children; she was surprised to find their brother "quite a young man." Wisdom was very speedily justified of her children, in the instance of Mrs. Dunville. Percy Clewer so distinctly and speedily "made a fool of himself" by falling in love with the pretty penniless governess, that things became exceedingly uncomfortable for Florence, and Mrs. Clewer was frightened out of her small allowance of wits. She resorted to subterfuge, the resource of the weak, and found so much fault with Miss Reeve's method of teaching, with her toleration of Jessie's stoop, and Lilian's inartistic pose of her hands on the piano—Florence's own blue eyes, fair skin, and elegant figure were the real grounds of objection—that poor Florence was forced to take the hint, and to feel that, with one precious, inestimable exception, she was now friendless indeed. She wrote to the exception, who thereupon took a resolution, imprudent to the last degree, but not unnatural under the circumstances.

"It is the only way in which I can really protect her," thought Walter; "and if I can live on my allowance, as I am doing now, I'll back her woman's wit, economy, and self-denial to make it do for two."

Florence had told him that she was in daily dread of receiv-

ing her dismissal. He entreated her to forestall such a possibility, by resigning at once, and begged her to come to London, where he would provide a lodging for her, and tell her what he had thought of as a resource for the future. Simply, unhesitatingly, Florence obeyed him, thereby affording great relief to Mrs. Clewer's troubled mind. If she had dismissed Miss Reeve, she must have explained matters to Mr. Clewer, and that gentleman was not a comfortable subject for domestic explanations. Now she could tell him that Miss Reeve had given her notice. She did tell him so, adding, that she was leaving them to better herself, a white lie which did not disturb Mrs. Clewer's conscience—her moral sense, like that of many excellent women, was singularly somnolent, except where her domestic interests were concerned—and which perfectly satisfied the Rev. Jackson. Mrs. Clewer did not concern herself to know more of Florence—it was no business of hers; and really, she could not be sufficiently thankful for dear Percy's sake, or sufficiently cautious in future arrangements.

Walter Clint was of age; Florence Reeve was an orphan, too unimportant to have guardians, and unpossessed of "next friends;" consequently, there was no difficulty about their marriage. Florence was greatly startled at first, when she learned the plan which Walter had devised; but it was easy to persuade her—and she had no adequate notion of the risk Walter was incurring. He seemed to be almost as friendless as herself, and the difficulties of their engagement were really greater than those of a marriage. A very short time found Walter Clint in the incongruous position of a medical student with a wife, living in a City boarding-house—all his familiar friends being aware of the fact, but united in an honourable compact "to keep it dark" in every quarter whence it might, by mischance, reach the ears of Walter's "governor."

That was a pretty love-story enough, with all its prose, and the young couple were very happy and harmless. Walter's *adaptable disposition* lent itself readily to the quiet routine of

their undeniably dull life, and Florence would have been perfectly content if she could only have helped Walter in some way. She proposed to do so by giving lessons in the neighbourhood of their abode, but after a while she had not strength for any exertion of the kind, and it soon became necessary to draw upon the fund which constituted her sole worldly wealth. A little cottage, in as near an imitation of the country as the district east of London attainable by omnibus could supply, was taken for the young wife, and there she lived in complete and happy retirement. After his marriage, Walter gave his father no more cause for complaint in money-matters; his demands ceased. But Mr. Clint was no better pleased with him for that. He could not brook the notion that the son whom he had almost discarded could get on without him; and he secretly chafed because the young man, whose home he had made intolerable to him, displayed no eagerness to induce him to repeal the sentence of his banishment from it. Walter, meantime, was profoundly unconscious of, and serenely indifferent to, his father's state of mind. He was very happy, very much in love, and delighted with the knowledge that he had done a brave and manly thing in shielding this young girl, who repaid him so richly in absolute trust, and simple, unquestioning devotion from her sad and desolate fate.

Walter had made no false calculation when he counted on the self-sacrifice and the frugality of Florence. They were remarkable and they availed much, but they could not ward off poverty and distress when Florence fell ill some time before the birth of her child—who only lived a few hours—and continued weak and ailing for many weeks, requiring ease and nourishment, and medical attendance, all making a great devastation of the hundred pounds which formed their sole provision against a rainy day. It did not only rain on the young couple, it poured. Walter's own health became impaired, by the absence of comforts to which he had always been accustomed, and by previous prolonged confinement to *London air*.

When Florence was recovering from her illness, and beginning to investigate their financial condition with alarm, Walter made a new acquaintance, who was destined to influence his after-life in a degree second only to that in which it had been affected by the young lady now his wife.

"You've no notion what a capital fellow Daly is," he said to Florence one evening, when coaxing her to confess she felt well enough to allow him to invite his new friend to the cottage at George Lane, Wanstead. She *was* well enough, but had been unwilling to make the admission from economical considerations, of the drinkables to follow, involved in an invitation to tea. "He really is such a nice fellow, Flo, and wonderfully good-looking. Not one of your lady-like men, or languid swells, but a fine, tall, well-built, manly fellow, with features like a Greek statue, only they've plenty of meaning in them, and a voice which I'm sure you could not resist."

"H'm! that would depend on what the voice said," was Flo's sage reply. "What is Mr. Lawrence Daly to be?" she added.

"I can't tell you. You have posed me there, little Flo! He talks of being a doctor, and is studying, not so seriously as I am studying, though—you see, he has not such motives—but I don't think he will make much of it. The toiling one's way upward in a profession is work too slow for him, I fancy—he is dashing, you know. I don't mean to say he is not industrious; but he's more dashing, and, I fancy—he has not told me much about himself as yet—he has not been very well treated by his family, or by some one or other. In that respect, he and I are much of a muchness. I think he will be off to the other side of the world some day, and come back a rich man."

"But people don't get rich at the other side of the world, any more than here, if they have not money to begin with, do they?"

"True, little Flo; but then they don't want so much to *begin with*, and they make a great deal more of it."

"Let us go, Walter," said Florence, in an innocent half-jest, half-earnest way, "to the other side of the world, and make some money."

Florence had found out by this time how much more expensive a luxury life was than she had thought it ; and that her seemingly satisfactory calculations had excluded such accidents as infants and illnesses, and she was getting frightened.

Walter took a few turns about the room, glancing at her with an anxious, furtive look before he answered.

"It might not be a bad plan, Flo ; there's no getting on here, for people without money, or more brains than I've got ; and we are always on the verge of a precipice as well. My father would stop my allowance, and leave us to starve, if he knew—"

"Walter !" said Florence, with a very pale face and an alarmed voice, "you told me your quarrel with your father was hopeless before. I never knew there would have been any chance for you. I never knew I could make things worse."

"Nor can you, my darling," said Walter, hurrying to her, and taking her in his arms tenderly. "I never had the ghost of a chance of anything more than he does for me now, and our marriage has really been the means of my keeping that, for I never could live within my allowance before. If he found out about it, he could do no more than he might have done any day, on any pretext, or none. But, darling Flo, things are getting serious, and we must consider what it would be best to do."

CHAPTER VII.

LAWRENCE DALY.

A FEW days after that serious review of their affairs had been held by the young couple, Walter brought his friend Lawrence Daly to see Florence, and pass a quiet evening at the little cottage in George Lane. Florence had been rather down-hearted all day. She had come to the conclusion, in sober earnest, that something must indeed be done. Her wardrobe was reduced to a very insufficient quantity ; Walter's was hardly fit to be seen ; and sundry small debts were accumulating, until the whole threatened to become a large debt. What should she do ? They could not afford to live in any but a very cheap place, and very cheap places did not produce pupils requiring to be taught French, Italian, music, and "the elements" of drawing. Supposing she could make up her mind to the dreadful sacrifice of separation from Walter, people would not take a young married woman as a governess ; and, if even they would, she felt that she was no longer sufficiently strong to endure the stated hours, the formal walks, and the constant presence of noisy, self-engrossed children. Florence had been crying a good deal, while she looked over her little stock of baby-clothes, and put them away ; but her tears were not called forth by sorrowful remembrance of the hopes which had not been realized, but by the reflection that it would be so much better for her never again to have any such hopes ; it seemed so sad and dreary that she ought not to wish for children. "Poor little creatures ! what would become of them ?" thought Florence, as she turned the key in the drawer *in which she had placed the little shirts and frocks, at*

the back, well out of sight, and began to cogitate again on that impracticable theme, What was she to do?

Florence could see a little way up the pretty lane beside which their cottage stood, and which was turned into an arcade by the rich foliage of the over-arching trees, in the beautiful luxuriant summer-time. She dried her eyes, smoothed her pretty fair hair, added a ribbon to her ordinary dress, in honour of the festive nature of the occasion, and seated herself at the window, which commanded a few hundred yards of the lane. Her watch was not much prolonged; she soon saw Walter coming along, carrying his hat in his hand, and running his fingers through his curly hair, as he talked to his companion with much animation. In a moment Florence was standing at the little gate, and Lawrence Daly was making up his mind that if a very pretty face, with a sweet innocent expression, and the kindest blue eyes in the world, could excuse Walter for such an imprudence as his marriage, he was excused.

Florence felt the momentary shyness common to young wives on their first introduction to their husband's particular friends; but it speedily passed away, under the influence of Lawrence Daly's bright manner, and his frank courtesy. It was not until they had made some progress in the meal which Florence had prepared, with sundry misgivings concerning its quality, that she had courage and leisure to observe what manner of man Lawrence Daly was. He was very handsome—that she acknowledged at once; and even did not deny that he was handsomer than Walter; the comparison being forced upon her as she looked from one to the other, while they talked and joked merrily. He was tall and strongly built, but with an easy elegance of figure, so that each attitude seemed his best, and any kind of attire was becoming to him. His features were nearly faultless in outline, but not, therefore, insipid, because the faults, the over-height, the too massive weight of the forehead, the tallness of the head above the ears, while they broke the ideal correctness of the face, were welcome to the eye, which *discovered in them the indications of superior intellect, delightfully*

supplementing the mere beauty of the face. His large, full, resolute eyes were of the darkest grey, and remarkably brilliant ; and when he smiled, the sparkle in them was fascinating, so full was it of life, courage, and the power of enjoyment. A great quantity of golden brown hair curled closely all over his head, and he anticipated the fashion of a later date by wearing a fine beard, and a long thick moustache, which had never been injured by capricious shaving. After awhile, Florence arrived at the conclusion that he was the handsomest man she had ever seen ; then that he had the most musical, manly, meaning voice she had ever heard ; and, finally, he inspired her with a delightful security, convincing her that with him Walter, whom she would not have consciously suspected of weakness of character, or need of guidance, for the world—would be quite “safe.”

Florence was not aware that she was a very sensible little person, possessed of a great deal of penetration, and far stronger in courage and principle than her husband. From the mere entertainment of such an idea as the latter she would indeed have shrunk as from domestic treason. She had often hesitated to trust her own judgment, when it differed from his, and now that she felt so strongly attracted towards Lawrence Daly, she was rejoiced to know that there would be perfect accord between herself and Walter. But, though she was clear-sighted, Florence was not suspicious, and her enjoyment of the pleasant society of her husband's friend was not disturbed by any idea that he and Walter were talking on a systematic plan. During the tea-drinking, which seemed so entirely to Lawrence Daly's taste, they were leading up to the introduction of a certain topic, which it had been resolved to discuss, and for which it was necessary to prepare her. Daly had done a good deal of profitless, desultory travel in his boyhood, and had carried back from it many bright, artistic impressions, which he related with force and spirit, very delightful to simple, inexperienced Florence, who did not detect that his purpose was to familiarize her with *the ideas of distance, of locomotion, and of adventure.*

When the tea-things were removed, and Florence's head was bent over her needlework, the two men exchanged glances, and then Walter Clint said :

"You remember, Flo, we agreed the other day that something must be done to alter our circumstances for the better?"

"Yes, Walter."

"And that I said I should consult Daly? Well, here he is, come down to hold a council of war. I have told him enough to make him understand exactly how we are situated, and he will go into it all fully with us, if you like."

"I shall like very much, Walter," returned his wife, looking, not at her husband, but at Lawrence Daly. "If you have really told Mr. Daly all, I am sure he must think our marriage was very imprudent; but I hope he knows how generous it was of you, and how helpless and unprotected I was." Her voice trembled a little, and a tear fell on her work.

"Mrs. Clint," said Daly earnestly, "my candid belief is that Walter never did a *less* imprudent deed in his life. If I wanted any other proof of that than the scene before me, I should find it in the courage and the resolution which enable him to contemplate a painful way out of his difficulties, and a road, though a rough one, to independence."

"What is that way?" asked Florence earnestly; and she laid her work on the table; and pushed it from her. Walter unconsciously moved his chair closer to hers.

"It is by leaving England for awhile, for a few years, as I am about to do, and going to a country where there is a rich reward for hard work and endurance."

"I proposed to Walter that we should go to some of the places where they say that is the case myself," said Florence eagerly. "Did I not, Walter?"

"You did, Flo; but we don't quite mean it in that way."

She was silent. She never could exactly recall afterwards *how* it was that Lawrence Daly explained to her that she was *to be parted from* Walter, to remain in England, while he went

to the modern El Dorado, whose fascination was at that time in its first vigour and magic. He drew pictures for her of the grandeur and beauty of the land of wonders ; he explained to her that there, by hard work and patience, courage and endurance, for a short term of years—that sounds so trifling to a man, it signifies so much to a woman—sufficient money might be made to enable Walter to return, to take up his profession in a creditable manner, without the wearing anxiety of total dependence upon it, placing her in the comfortable and assured position which he so earnestly desired for her, and rendering him independent of the caprices and unkindness of his father.

“It would be very nice not to be obliged to care, if he really did leave his money to a hospital, or to a housemaid,” struck in Walter at this point, with a feeble attempt at cheerfulness.

Florence remembered that he had told her Daly was going abroad “to the other end of the world,” and she began to understand that the plan which they were “breaking” to her was that her husband should accompany him as a partner in his enterprises. She was of a submissive nature, not apt to revolt against anything only because she did not like it, and she felt instinctive confidence in Daly. Her womanly prudence made her more conscious of the peril of their position than was Walter, though he contemplated this way out of it ; and, with all her quietness, she felt strong admiration of courage, and sympathy with adventure. “It would not matter much to me,” she had thought more than once during the last few weeks ; “but if things grew worse, *he* would be discontented and unhappy.” She did not put into words that fine truth, that love will not sustain men under adverse circumstances as it will sustain women ; but she felt it as applied to Walter.

Lawrence Daly was the chief speaker, and in his eagerness to cheer and comfort her he let his vivid imagination loose, and drew gorgeous pictures of California ; pictures in which the discomfort, the danger, the dreariness of the journey thither

had no place, for he reckoned confidently and correctly upon Florence's ignorance on those points. She listened with keen interest; for, though her heart was sinking at the thought of parting with Walter, she kept the truth from her, and let herself listen as though it did not exist. She had not consented; nothing was settled, nothing was real as yet. When, in after-years, Florence recalled that evening to her memory, it was with a dream-like feeling, strangely inappropriate to one of the most important epochs in her life.

"Do you think of going to California merely because you are fond of travelling and adventure?" asked Florence, who wondered whether Daly knew how poor her husband was, how very little money he could contribute to such an undertaking.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Clint," replied Lawrence; "I have other and weightier reasons. I am nearly as poor a man as Walter, and such expectations as I have are of a more treacherous nature than his. I am going to California to try to get a share of the gold there, because I doubt my ability to make money in a profession here, and because, whether I have ability or not, I am quite certain I have not patience for the process. I am young, strong, and naturally fond of adventure. I am very tired of my unsatisfactory life, and I see nothing more enticing in prospect, if I remain here. I am quite without friends, in the useful, pecuniary-accommodation sense of the word, and I am sure I shall find no gold unless I dig it out of the earth myself."

"You cannot be more friendless than Walter and I," said Florence, with a tearful glance at her young husband's moody face.

"Oh! yes, I can," said Lawrence, "for Walter has you, and you have Walter, for the best of friends, and whether you are together or apart, you are still that to each other; but I am only an excrescence on the face of society. I have no *raison d'être*, and I think I should like to make one for myself. One cannot do that if one is dependent on anybody, or in an attitude

of waiting for anything, whether it be living men's patronage or dead men's shoes. I am tired of waiting for the former, and I don't want to wear the latter, so I am going Westward ho ! to the wonderful country which is giving a fresh impulse to our old civilization, and is speaking of new hopes and possibilities to millions of men hitherto fettered by the narrow conditions of life. Let Walter come with me, Mrs. Clint, and he shall return here, freed from any need of courting his father's favour, or desiring his inheritance."

"How long would that take to accomplish?" asked Florence, with a melancholy shake of her head.

"I cannot tell you ; but not long, I am convinced. All accounts of the gold-fields tell us of rapid fortune or of complete failure ; there is no medium, and little suspense. I will tell you what I propose, Mrs. Clint. It is that you and Walter shall name a certain period, during which he shall try his fortunes with me ; and then, if we are not successful, he shall return. I cannot believe his position with his father will be injured by so bold and manly an effort ; or yours, when the time comes to acknowledge your marriage, by your endurance of such a trial. And then, if the New World has not used him well, he has only to try the Old World once more."

"And supposing this is agreed to," asked Florence, "where is the money to come from which Walter would need ?"

"I propose that he should frankly tell his father what his purpose is, and ask him for a sum of money in lieu of his allowance ; and," he added, observing the unmistakable expression upon Mrs. Clint's face, of her belief that Walter would not get the money in that way, "if that fails, Walter shall share the little I have, and pay me back with interest out of the strong-box of the gnomes."

"You have very little more than enough for yourself, old fellow," said Walter.

"Enough for one's self is an indefinite quantity, Walter, determinable by circumstances. We shall not be quite so comfortable if we have no more between us than I have got ; but

comfort is also an indefinite quantity ; and, I take it, you and I will contrive to have as much as we want."

"That cannot be, Mr. Daly," said Florence.

"It must be," replied Lawrence, "in the case that Walter requires it should be. Be reasonable, both of you, and listen to me. There you are, married. That can't be helped, even if either of you would allow it to be. You are in a critical position, and you must be taken out of it. There is one way for Walter to do it, and I have no doubt whatever he will succeed. He is my dearest friend. I should hate to undertake this alone. Who is to help him but me, if his father won't? But I think his father will."

His cheerful way of dealing with the matter disarmed Florence, and Walter had known his friend's generous intentions beforehand. Insensibly she found herself discussing details with the two, and learning from Lawrence Daly an outline of his own story. It was simple, and not devoid of sadness.

"If you understand the meaning of our Irish word 'ramshackle,' you will know the kind of people to whom I belonged," said Lawrence ; "if you don't, you will hardly realize how little chance I had of useful education or practical training in my childhood. I come of a 'good,' meaning an old, family in the west of Ireland. When I arrived on the scene of my ancestral honours, there was little else left ; and before my father's death—he died young—there was nothing. My mother and I, and a pretty sister of my mother's—I was fonder of Aunt Kate than of any one in the world—lived in Dublin, on a little bit of an income, which was their joint property ; and I got some schooling somehow. I don't think my poor mother 'minded me' much, as another of our Irish sayings has it ; she was pre-eminently of the ramshackle order, and had a placid faith in my tumbling up somehow. It was justified by events, for I have tumbled up, and here I am ; but I am tired of the process.

"When I was fourteen years old, Aunt Kate married ; and *I am sorry to say I am afraid she did the rash deed very*

much more for my own sake than for her own, or for that of the bridegroom—a rich but disagreeable party, in a large way of business in Calcutta, who had come home to look for a wife, not approving of the articles with which the market was glutted in those days, and had fallen in love with Aunt Kate's blue eyes and fair skin on his first sight of them. She had a great deal more than her beauty to recommend her, but I don't think Clibborn was the man to appreciate anything else. I never saw him, but I never liked him; and I think, indeed I know, the marriage was not a success. He promised her, among other things, that he would do wonders for me; and he did pay for a better kind of education than my poor mother, who died the year after Kate's marriage, could have given me. He had a sort of right to look after me a little, too, independent of Aunt Kate, for he was a relation of my father's; the kinsmanship was very distant, I believe; but still it existed, and, in fact, had led to the introduction to my mother and sister, which resulted in this marriage. He was not a man to take anything of *that* kind into consideration, however; and I never thought anything about our tenth cousinship, to which Aunt Kate clung; though, distant as was that tie, I believe it was the only one he had: I never heard of another relative of Clibborn's.

“My aunt's plan was that I should go out to India, on leaving school, and have a place in the ‘house’ of Clibborn and Co.—by that time there was no Co. But Mr. Clibborn did not see it: he did not want me out there; I suppose he had found out that Aunt Kate did not love him with inconvenient fervour, and that she cared more for me than for anything else in the world. At any rate, Aunt Kate found her plan was not to be carried out; and I am afraid Clibborn used me as a means of making her unhappy and ‘breaking her in,’ to an extent she was not prepared for. I hated my dependence upon him, and it was complete, for, after all, though she had handed over her little income to me, she could only have done it by *his sanction*; and I cannot say much for my con-

duct in any way. I suppose the ramshackle tradition clung to me. Clibborn wanted to put me into a Liverpool house, but I would not go ; I wanted a commission in the army—the one idea of all Irish lads in my time—and Clibborn positively refused to buy it for me. I pronounced, then, for the sea, and tried it—vainly ; I could not stand it—merchant-service, of course. I think I should have liked it, if I could have put in at Calcutta, and had a peep at Aunt Kate, unknown to Clibborn. I made up my mind to medicine, *quand même* ; and here I was, living in lodgings, like Walter, when he and I met, and very soon became good friends—as we shall be ‘mates’ before long, and *camarados* for ever. And now I have told you my story.”

“Not quite,” said Florence. “You have not told me why you are about to give up your medical studies, and go to California.”

Daly’s face clouded over, and his tone was changed, as he replied,—

“My aunt is dead, Mrs. Clint. She died shortly after she last wrote to me, now nearly a year ago. Mr. Clibborn carried out her last wishes, in so far as sending me three hundred pounds, which she had saved out of her allowance for personal expenses, may be said to fulfil them ; but he never took any real interest in me ; never cared whether I did well, or went to the devil ; used me, I sincerely believe, as a means of tormenting her ; and the few communications which had taken place between us did not increase our mutual esteem. My aunt’s small annuity ceased with her life, as in my mother’s case ; and therefore, you see, I have nothing to depend on, and am more than ever convinced I need not place any reliance on Mr. Clibborn. Indeed, I would not take anything more from him ; I hate the old fellow, for my poor Aunt Kate’s sake. And there’s nothing to be done here with three hundred—nothing that I am capable of doing, at least. But it will take Walter and me to the gold-diggings, if we manage it well. And when we come back, we shall be too *rich to remember how poor we were when we started.*”

“ And Mr. Clibborn ? ” asked Florence, who had listened with close attention to Lawrence Daly’s story.

“ He said he was coming to England—retiring from business, I suppose. He wrote very briefly, did not say anything about wishing to see me, which was a decided relief to my feelings ; in fact, he may be in England now, for anything I know or care.”

CHAPTER VIII.

SISTERS-IN-LAW.

FLORENCE resigned herself to her fate. She had a conviction that if Walter relinquished this project, and remained in London without his friend, he would "do no good," and she submitted. The next thing was to consider how to bestow herself during his absence. She preferred to take a situation in a school to going out as a governess or a companion, and made inquiries in many directions with that view. When her consent had been obtained; when everything was arranged, then Walter's courage broke down, and he was full of misgivings about her. He was leaving her so lonely, so unprotected! If he could have told Miriam the truth, and gained her friendship for his poor young wife! But Miriam had no more power than he had, no more influence. She could not actively befriend her; and as for money, their father was more strict and less generous to Miriam than to him. No; there was no help in that direction. Then it chanced that Walter heard from his friend, Mr. Martin, that Miriam was expected at The Firs, and that he saw the advertisement which Mr. Clint had sent to the newspapers. He instantly divined that the young lady for whom the services of a maid were required was his sister, and acted promptly upon the supposition, with what success has been already told.

If Miriam's home had been more like the ordinary homes of English girls of her class in life, if Miriam's father had been a less eccentric and eminently disagreeable member of society, the daring expedient to which Walter had resorted would have *been far more difficult* of execution. But everything was ex-

ceptional at The Firs ; and Miriam speedily saw her way to securing her brother's wife against the many unpleasant contingencies of the position she had assumed. The housekeeper was easily persuaded, by the prospect of non-interference on the part of Miriam, to connive at the irregularity of the young lady's meals, with the exception of dinner, being served in her sitting-room, for her and Rose jointly.

The girl was very good-looking and civil, and she "knew her place," never seemed conscious of the existence of Robert, the groom, in whom Mrs. Ritchie took a tender interest—ungratefully requited—and if Miss Miriam chose to make a companion of her, Mrs. Ritchie saw no reason why she should not have her way ; goodness knows the place was dull enough, and the poor young lady must have some one to speak to besides the parson, the lawyer, and the doctor. Other folks might come, mayhap, visiting at The Firs, but they had not come yet. So Miriam and Rose had things their own way ; and though Rose acted her part to some extent, she did nothing that was distasteful or unbecoming. All the needlework was jointly done, and the circumstances of their mutual position afforded a topic of endless conversation between the two young women. Miriam won the love of simple, gentle Florence, before they were many days together. The difference between them attracted each to the other. Florence honestly believed Miriam to be as superior to herself as she held Walter to be, and genuine, ingenious flattery of that kind was very welcome to Miriam. They talked perpetually about Walter, reading his letters and discussing them together. Mrs. Ritchie did not hold with any "girls" receiving so many letters as those which came for Miss Rose Dixon ; but so long as none of them bore tokens of masculine origin, it did not so much matter, and all Miss Rose's letters were directed in a fine sloping ladylike hand.

Mr. Clint had taken no notice of Rose Dixon, beyond a surly nod in acknowledgment of her salutation when they met on the stairs *on the morning* after the arrival of Miriam, and a

casual remark afterwards to his daughter that her maid was a good-looking girl. Florence dreaded this meeting quite unreasonably, and was proportionably relieved when it had taken place, and when she found that she might live in the house for weeks without seeing its gloomy and miserable master.

Miriam and Florence held solemn counsel over the letter in which Walter told his sister what was the one request he had to make of her. It was temperately, gravely written, and Florence fancied its manner and tone had been suggested by Lawrence Daly. This letter had come openly, addressed in Walter's own hand, to his sister, and Miriam knew that her father was aware she had received it. She looked forward with some trepidation to seeing him, though she regarded it as a good sign that he had not confiscated the letter.

"Show it to him," said Florence : " I think the manly tone, the courage of it, and the respectful forbearance with which Walter alludes to himself, must touch his father."

" I hope so," said Miriam dubiously ; " but I am afraid he will not believe in the genuineness of these professions. Papa believes that no one in the world is sincere and truth-telling but himself."

Miriam went down to the dreaded, inevitable dinner in fear and trembling, and kept constantly feeling the letter hidden in her pocket, so that the gesture attracted her father's attention, and when they were alone, he asked her impatiently what she had got there. She summoned up all her courage, and answered,—

" A letter from Walter, papa ; he wishes me to make you acquainted with the contents."

" Indeed ! " said her father, and his brow was knit instantly with the frown she knew so well. " And how are the contents of this letter, which you disobediently receive, and your brother disobediently writes, likely to concern me ? "

" Papa," said Miriam, laying her hand on the letter on the table before her, " I *must* hear from my brother, and I *must*."

write to him. You have forbidden me to see him, and I submit to *that*, while I am in your house, but—”

She was interrupted by a sudden explosion of wrath. Her father had been in the habit of swearing at her and Walter, when they were children, to their extreme terror; but she had hoped that now, in early womanhood, she might be spared such outrageous indignity. She was undeceived. He poured out a torrent of oaths as he stigmatized her conduct as rebellious and insolent; told her she had better take care how she disobeyed him, if she did not want to join her brother in his banishment from home; and, in short, raged like the madman his temper made him. Miriam looked at him steadily, listened to him for a few minutes, then rose, and darted through the door near her, out of the room. She told Florence what had passed; and they were still talking of it, full of dismay, when a servant knocked at the door, and delivered a written message from Mr. Clint.

“Put your brother’s letter in a sealed envelope, and send it to me.”

Miriam obeyed her father’s directions; and when the servant had retired, taking the letter, the two girls sat looking at one another in silence, suffering such misery as only domestic tyranny can inflict.

“What will he do?” Florence whispered at length.

“God knows. Of one thing I am certain—we shall not know, except through Walter. *He* will not tell us. One of his favourite devices is to keep any one who is anxious, in suspense as long as possible.”

Miriam was right. Mr. Clint returned the letter to her on the following morning, in a sealed envelope, but without a word; and when they met at dinner, he maintained an unbroken silence, not only on that, but on all other subjects. Miriam was profoundly miserable, not because her father did not speak to her—she found that an infliction easy of endurance—but because she felt the whole state of things so hopeless, so *degrading*. This was her own natural inalienable home,

and yet she felt like an outcast, a beggar, a not decently tolerated inconvenience in it.

"He did not speak one word to me," she said to Florence when she escaped to her own room: "he sat there silent, looking as if he hated me, which I have no doubt he does."

"Don't say anything so horrid," said Florence, shocked at Miriam's cool, convinced tone.

"Horrid, but quite true." She threw herself into a chair, and tapped the floor with her foot impatiently. "We shall know nothing, Rose, until we hear from Walter himself the result of his application; and then—when Walter is gone, I mean, and there is no possible danger of his finding out who you are—it's some comfort that he has not had quite his own way in everything—I intend to turn my attention to getting away from this as soon as possible."

"Getting away from this! And how?"

"How? By the only means by which a girl can get away from a place she does not like, in the only way in which she can take her fate into her own hands—by marrying a man who will give me a home of my own."

"That would be a dangerous experiment, unless you loved him," said Florence, with a pretty matronly gravity which became her well. "Is there any one whom you do love, and with whom you would be happier than you are here?"

Miriam laughed uneasily. "You take everything so seriously, Rose. My rescuer is only ideal: he has no existence, so far as I know; he certainly has to be sought and found. I do not care one straw for any one in the world whom I should ever dream of marrying! But I can tell you this, Rose, I intend to seek and to find some one who will take me away from this hateful place, though he should be as ugly as sin and as old as Methuselah!"

Florence was rather cowed by her sister-in-law's stronger nature; and she was, besides, too much engrossed in the *sorrowful reality of her own life*, the retrospect of her past, the

long, indefinite separation from Walter, her uneasy sense of her own false position, concerning which she never could altogether silence her conscience, to be able to make the remonstrance for which she felt the occasion called. She could not blame Miriam severely ; she could only feel that there was a great difference between them, and that she could never have proposed to herself such a way out of any position of trouble as a marriage without love.

"You are much better off than I am," Miriam broke out, after a brief pause. "You have not got to put up with papa ; you only see him occasionally by accident, and could even avoid that with a little trouble. I have always said it was well for Walter, for he could get away ! And I will get away, too, if I can."

Three days elapsed, during which the state of things at The Firs remained almost unchanged. Mr. Clint did speak occasionally to his daughter, but he made no reference to Walter or his letter. At the end of that time Florence heard from her husband that he had received a communication from his father, couched in the sternest and coldest terms.

"I asked him, through Miriam, as you know," wrote Walter, "to give me £300, to join with Daly, and told him he should never receive another application for money from me, nor hear of me again if I were not successful. He tells me he accedes to my request ; encloses the money, and begs me to understand that he requires strict adherence to the terms of my letter ! There is the whole substance of his for you ; there is my dismissal from England ; there is my father's farewell to his only son ! Never mind, darling ; I don't, for I have your love and your truth, and you will welcome me home whether I am successful or not. But I shall succeed : I am full of hope and confidence. I have simply acknowledged, with thanks, my father's letter and its contents ; that is the only answer he cares to have from me. And now, I have nothing to think of but you and our long parting." And then the letter dealt in sentiments *wherewith we are not concerned*. Florence was very sad after

she had read Walter's letter. It was a great relief that his father had given him the money he asked for ; that Walter was not to commence his new career with a debt to his generous friend ; but that the father and son should part thus was terrible to her, quite apart from the share she had accepted, out of obedience to Walter, in this untoward family history.

Neither she nor Miriam could discover in the face or manner of Mr. Clint any symptom of relenting towards his son, or regret for his departure. When the day came on which Walter was to sail with Daly from Liverpool, Miriam locked herself into her rooms, declined all attendance except that of her maid—who was much pitied by the servants for her enforced seclusion, because her mistress was “fretting”—and sent word to her father that she was not well enough to appear at dinner. Mr. Clint dined none the worse, and left the dining-room none the earlier ; but when he went to his study, he set a mark against the date of that day in a private memorandum-book, and wrote out under it that terrible utterance of old Lear's, which says that “sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.” It never occurred to Reginald Clint that he could be wrong in anything ; he never reflected that it was not fair to expect love and consideration from children to whom he had never shown either, but had invariably treated with the opposite of both.

Time went on, after the day of Walter's departure, very slowly and painfully to the two women who loved him best, and whose hearts were with him on his tedious and perilous voyage. A long period must elapse before they could have tidings from him. The colour faded in Florence's fair cheek, and her blue eyes lost much of their brightness. Miriam, too, was sad and sorrowful, but she was also ineffably bored, which Florence was not. All places were alike to her without Walter, in one sense ; but, in another, The Firs was the place where she best liked to be. It was eloquent of Walter to her ; and she took a romantic pleasure in comparing every nook and corner of the *unlovely old house* and grounds with the picture which

his description had summoned up in her imagination. She liked The Firs, but Miriam hated the place. They had as little society as Miriam had expected, and her letters to Miss Monitor were full of this grievance. Mr. Martin, a homely person, to whom Miriam would hardly have condescended, if she had had any choice ; the "shady" attorney before mentioned ; and the parson and his wife, who were not to be defeated by Mr. Clint's rudeness, in their charitable design of being kind to Miriam, formed their entire circle. The "county" did not, since Mrs. Clint's death, visit at The Firs, and there were no neighbouring families of any gentility except the three aforesaid.

The greatest alleviation of Miriam's lot was the possession of a pony, a well-bred handsome animal, which had been selected for her by Mr. Martin ; to whose interposition, in his medical capacity, she owed her father's consent to such an addition to his expenses. It was not possible that Florence should share her good fortune in this respect, which vexed Miriam ; but Florence laughed at her vexation, drew a funny picture of the effect on public opinion of setting a maid on horseback, and was always well content to see Miriam set off, attended by Robert, for the long rides in the autumnal mornings, which left her at leisure to indulge her sad thoughts and timid hopes while she sat at her needlework. One day, after Miriam had been out longer than usual, she returned in high spirits, and carrying a bunch of fine flowers in her hand. Florence, who always kept up appearances by attending her at her toilet, was about to take off her hat, when Miriam forestalled her by tossing it on the bed, and breaking out at once into an account of her "adventures."

"Where do you suppose these flowers came from?" she asked Florence.

"Covent Garden, I should think."

"Just so. There's a gentleman come down to the Parsonage, an old acquaintance of Mr. Cooke's ; he's come to look at Winton—that place that's to be sold, over at Stoke, you

know—and he brought *such* flowers and fruit to Fanny! She *would* make me take these."

Florence had never seen Miriam look so animated. She had clipped the stalks of the flowers and put them in water, and now she resolutely began to take off Miriam's habit, reminding her that she had barely time to dress for dinner.

"You may be sure I said everything against Winton I could possibly think of," said Miriam. "I hate the place—a dull, gloomy barrack, in a sticky clay soil; besides, the neighbourhood is odious; fancy any one who has plenty of money, and all England to choose from, settling down here!"

"How did Mr. and Mrs. Cooke like your trying to persuade their friend against their neighbourhood?"

"Oh! he isn't a friend—he is only an acquaintance."

"Besides, I should have supposed a new family, so near as Stoke, would have been an advantage to yourself," said Florence.

"Oh, it isn't a family; it's only one person. Mr. St. Quentin is a widower. He has just returned from India, and wants to buy a place in England, in Hampshire especially. Some one gave him an introduction to Mr. Cooke; he won't employ any man of business in the purchase, and he came down to the inn. After they had seen him a few times, Fanny invited him to the Parsonage, and there he is."

"You saw him. I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I saw him; and he saw me." There was something odd in Miriam's deliberate tone, and she smiled demurely as her eyes met those of Florence reflected in the looking-glass before which she was seated.

"There's the bell. That will do, Rose"—she stopped on her way to the door—"don't look so suspicious. Mr. St. Quentin is not far from sixty."

CHAPTER IX.

A WAY OF ESCAPE.

“PLENTY of money, and all England to choose from !” Miriam had thus briefly and correctly defined Mr. St. Quentin’s position. It was not an unenviable one, though she was almost as accurate in her guess at his age. He was not far from sixty years old, but he was very well preserved, and had been a handsome man in his youth, of an order of handsome manhood of which the form lasts, and even improves. He was endowed with a fine constitution, and it had fulfilled its promise ; successfully defied the climate of India, the labours and vexations of a commercial career, which had, however, been rewarded with success and fortune, the luxurious life in which that fortune had enabled him to indulge, and such domestic afflictions as had befallen him. The latter had not been numerous, and Mr. St. Quentin never alluded to them. Those who knew him best knew no more than that he had married in England, and that his wife had died in India. He had no near relatives ; he never spoke of having any distant ones ; and he had always been a man of few intimacies.

Mr. St. Quentin did not make so grave a mistake in returning to Europe as many men make, in abandoning the mode of life to which years have habituated them, to take a place in a social system with which they have no longer anything in common. He had no plan in his mind for the revival of old associations, but he had a very well constructed scheme for the formation of a pleasant mode of life which should be entirely new. The sort of thing he asked of Europe, Europe could undoubtedly give him : the gratification of his material

inclinations, and of a late-grown taste for travel' in the Western World. Mr. St. Quentin was only moderately anxious about the fulfilment of his ostensible purpose in visiting Hampshire. He would buy a place in that county if he should find one to suit him ; but he would not be in a hurry about it, and the looking for such a thing would afford him an opportunity of making the pleasant surface sort of acquaintances of which he had few at present. He had been fortunate in the companions of his homeward voyage ; his fellow-travellers had got on well with him, and he had been popular. A man coming home from India, at his time of life, with a large fortune, and perfect health to enjoy it, is likely to be popular, if only on account of his rarity ; and his present visit to the highly respectable person so obnoxious to Mr. Clint was an early result of the favourable impression he made on strangers. Not one of his temporary associates had guessed Mr. St. Quentin's age so accurately as Miriam ; he had passed easily with them for "just turned fifty ;" and he would not have been by any means gratified had he been aware of this particular exercise of that "bright intelligence" on the part of his hostess's young friend, which he had commended as warmly as her handsome face and capital seat on horseback.

It is a favourite delusion with women that they look well in the saddle ; whereas, even pretty women rarely stand the test of the dress and the attitude successfully ; but in Miriam Clint's case it was not a delusion. When, as he was walking his horse slowly alongside of Mr. Cooke's, through one of the few pretty lanes in that part of the country, Miriam came towards them at a canter, her rare golden eyes sparkling, and her fair cheeks flushed with air and exercise, Mr. St. Quentin thought it was the pleasantest apparition he had seen for many a long year, and the unexpected meeting one of the most agreeable surprises within his experience. Miriam was on her way to the Parsonage, and the two gentlemen rode back thither with her. Mr. Cooke was too conscientious a man to indulge in uncharitable *speaking concerning* one of his parishioners ; but his wife, who

disliked Mr. Clint on the particular ground of his impertinence to her husband, as well as on the general score of his misbehaviour in all the relations of life, conceived herself absolved, by the particular grievance, from much tenderness towards Miriam's father. Accordingly, when her visitor questioned her respecting the pretty girl with whom Mr. Cooke had shared his extravagant gift of flowers, sent down from London, the Rector's wife told him a very unvarnished tale indeed. She dwelt chiefly on Mr. Clint's conduct to Walter, and the fatal estrangement between the father and son ; but she also drew a picture of Miriam's uncongenial and depressing life at The Firs ; a portion of her theme in which Mr. St. Quentin evinced a much more lively interest.

"Am I likely to see this pleasant specimen of paternity?" asked Mr. St. Quentin.

"Certainly not here. He and Mr. Cooke do not speak, and Miriam's visits are permitted only on sufferance, and the tacit condition that they are not frequent. I fancy she has more tact than poor Walter had, and manages her impracticable father better."

"Tact is an especial attribute of your sex."

"So men say. Assuredly we need it in dealing with yours. In this case, it is a pity Walter was not the girl, and Miriam the boy."

"Is he so very weak, then?"

"No ; I don't think so—but she is so very strong. I never knew a girl of her age with anything like Miriam Clint's determination of character. One perceives it in everything, small and great."

"She is very handsome," said Mr. St. Quentin, in a tone which somewhat puzzled Mrs. Cooke, but which signified that the speaker was disposed to regard Miss Clint's beauty as an excuse and compensation for so unnecessary and undesirable a quality as determination of character.

No more was said on that occasion concerning Miss Clint ; but Mr. St. Quentin took care to ride in the direction of The Firs

on the following day, and this time also he met Miriam. She was walking, accompanied by her maid; and if Mr. St. Quentin had been a younger man with quick sight, he might have seen that Miriam's arm rested on that of her attendant, which she squeezed significantly as she relinquished it. He might also have seen that the attendant folded up a letter hastily, and put it into her pocket, as she fell back into her proper place. But Mr. St. Quentin observed neither of these things; he only saw that Miriam was there, looking blooming, lovely, and glad to see him. With all the grace and elasticity which he could muster, he dismounted, encouraged by Miriam's looks, and walked by her side, leading his horse. Mr. St. Quentin talked well; and the newly emancipated school-girl enjoyed his lively humour, and had no objection to the evident admiration, which he kept strictly within the bounds of good taste. She expressed her sentiments regarding the neighbourhood very freely to her new acquaintance, who was careful to let her know that he had abandoned all idea of purchasing Winton. Florence walked demurely behind them, her mind wandering far away from them and from the surrounding scene; wandering back to her brief home-days with Walter, and onward hopefully enough—for she was of a cheerful temperament—to the future, when home might again exist for them.

A slight relaxation of Miriam's attention, some little uneasiness of manner, which her companion was quick to detect, led him to take leave of her at the point where the road on which they were walking turned towards The Firs. Miriam was not aware that she had betrayed any of her inward trepidation, but she felt a great deal. Suppose they should meet her father, who was usually about the place at this hour of the day, and he should be in an unfortunate phase of his chronic ill-temper, and should insult Mr. St. Quentin, and bully her, which was exceedingly probable. The tact and ease of manner of Mr. St. Quentin set her mind at rest in a moment, and *he, as he rode slowly away*, determined to find out the cause

of the uneasiness he had perceived. He guessed its origin unassisted, and felt a good deal of pity for Miriam, together with much increased admiration.

A practical man, at Mr. St. Quentin's age, if he begins to think at all of taking any important step, is not likely to overlook the fact that he had better not lose time about it. He was very much pleased when other people were mistaken about his age, but he never deceived himself on that point. In his plans for the new life on which he was to enter in Europe, a second marriage had not had a settled point; he had sometimes thought of it as a possibility, but one which he was content to leave to the chapter of accidents. He had not been a very devout believer in love at any period of his life, and love at first sight, on the part of a man of sixty, would have seemed to him a ludicrous and contemptible self-delusion. Yet it was something very like love at first sight with which Miriam Clint inspired him; it was as good an imitation of the sentiment as he had perhaps ever been capable of feeling, for his was not an elevated nature or a noble heart. There was a good deal of calculation in Mr. St. Quentin's disposition, and not much impulse, even as a young man. He had been very much struck by Miriam's beauty, by its fresh healthfulness, its fine bloom, without any touch of coarseness, which he could not have tolerated, even as a refreshing change from the pasty, faded faces of European women in India. Then the story which Mrs. Cooke had told him interested him; not, perhaps, on the most creditable or amiable grounds. He had no objection to the idea of a small and disunited family; he was not conscious of the distance his fancy had travelled, when he began to consider this branch of the subject; it involved much less trouble and responsibility, and interference, in case—

So far Mr. St. Quentin's thoughts had already conducted him, when his acquaintance with Miriam was three days old; they could hardly have been more expeditious had he been *only a third* of his actual age. The strongest feeling he

had excited in Miriam's mind was curiosity. His admiration gratified her vanity, which had found but scanty aliment in her dreary home-life, and her fancy went to work upon his antecedents, his position, and his wealth. Mrs. Cooke could not tell her much on any of those points, but the next time they met the two women talked about Mr. St. Quentin to their hearts' content.

His visit to the Parsonage lasted only one week, but before that week came to a conclusion he had made the acquaintance of Miriam's father, through the good offices of Mr. Martin, and had so skilfully managed the matter that his kind entertainers were not in the least offended that their guests should be on terms of acquaintanceship with a person who had treated them so badly. After all, the whole thing was anomalous, for did not Miriam visit them constantly? Mr. St. Quentin's intention of purchasing a place was not abandoned finally, when he yielded to the representations of Miriam, and gave up the idea of Winton. When their very pleasant new friend bade Mr. and Mrs. Cooke farewell, with a hearty acknowledgment of their kindness, it was with the understanding that he would return to their neighbourhood in a short time. He had contrived to see Miriam every day during that week, and she was perfectly conscious that he had seen her by contrivance, though the appearance of accident was admirably preserved. To her surprise and relief, her father had been very civil to Mr. St. Quentin. Even Mr. Clint occasionally grew tired of his sullen solitude ; and as this new acquaintance was not a fixture in the neighbourhood, there was no danger of his becoming what Mr. Clint called intrusive and troublesome. Her father was more gentlemanlike in his manner and more self-controlled, in the presence of this polished and agreeable stranger than Miriam had ever seen him ; and had even treated her with more civility, perhaps unconsciously influenced by the deferential attention paid to her in his presence by an older man than himself.

"If it were only for shaming papa into remembering that I

am a lady, I cannot but be grateful to Mr. St. Quentin," said Miriam to her sister-in-law, when they were discussing the guests who had just been speeded by Mr. Clint with quite exceptional politeness. "I should not be at all surprised if he made up the quarrel with the Cookes, and actually persuaded papa to forgive them the enormous offence of having been Walter's friends. He is really a delightful old gentleman."

"From the few glimpses of him I have contrived to obtain," said Florence, "I don't think he would like you to think him a delightful *old* gentleman! Elderly, at the outside, I fancy. He is very handsome; but I don't think he looks as if he had much heart."

"I dare say he hasn't," said Miriam carelessly; "but he has good manners, tact, and plenty of money."

"And good taste," said Florence, smiling affectionately at Miriam; "for, if ever I saw admiration, and something more, in a man's face, I saw it in his to-day as he was talking to you in the garden, when I brought out your parasol."

"*That* won't do him any harm, especially if he has no heart."

"No," said Florence; and then she was silent and thoughtful for awhile. "It seems absurd, and almost improper," she continued, "to entertain such an idea about a man of his age; but I cannot help saying to you that I do think he is trying to make himself agreeable to you; and do you think it is quite fair to let him?"

Miriam looked at the frank, fair face of her brother's wife, and an unpleasant feeling, remotely akin to shame, stirred within her. She knew quite well that Mr. St. Quentin meant to return to the neighbourhood of The Firs entirely on her account; she knew that she had allowed him to perceive that she was aware of it; she was conscious that, in the slightest possible mutual understanding on such a subject between a girl of her age and a man at Mr. St. Quentin's there was something *little short* of odious; but the warp in Miriam's

mind was increasing with every day's experience of her home, and with her growing detestation of it.

"I am going to be quite frank with you, dear," said Miriam, as she placed herself on a cushion on the floor beside Florence—a favourite seat of hers. "It is all right that you should feel about such things as you do. You and Walter were young lovers, young husband and wife, and all the romance and enthusiasm of love were yours. Well, just see the price you have paid, and are paying for it! I will never pay any price, for I will never make the purchase. It is a horrid thing to you, no doubt; but I have never been in love, remember, and a businesslike view of things is not unnatural to me. I cannot endure the wretched prison-like restraint of my hateful home. No husband could be so hard, so impossible to put up with, as papa."

Florence shook her head.

"No, no; I repeat it: no husband could make my life so wretched as papa makes it. I have no reason to believe that such an idea as asking me to marry him has even entered Mr. St. Quentin's head; but I don't deny that I have thought I should be glad if it did. He is very rich, and he has no relatives to hate and envy his wife, and dispute his wealth with her; he is a gentleman, a man of education, and perfectly independent. He could help Walter, and set me free from the bondage of this place. I could like him quite well enough, and I am sure he is too sensible to expect more. I could do my duty by him. In short, all this is folly, you know, Rose, and I am talking nonsense on purpose, just because you began it, in your wise way; but—but—if it were, by any extraordinary chance, to be so, it would be, at least, a way of escape."

CHAPTER X.

RISKING IT.

WHEN Mr. St. Quentin found himself in London, his inclination to form a second marriage, and thus make an important alteration in the programme he had sketched out for the employment and enjoyment of his remaining years of health and spirits, did not subside, but rather grew stronger. He was a rich man ; he had the means of indulging every taste he possessed, and no one was ever more conscious of the power of wealth than Mr. St. Quentin. But he believed himself to be free from delusion or credulity on that subject ; he believed himself to know as well what money could not, as what it could, buy. Among purchasable things he did not enumerate the love of a handsome young girl like Miriam ; but he did enumerate the handsome young girl herself, and he seriously contemplated making that purchase. The investment would be less hazardous than most of its kind, and less onerous. Miriam had seen nothing of the world ; consequently, she would be satisfied with seeing such portions and phases of it as he should choose to show her, after what fashion he pleased. She had a very unhappy home, and therefore would be grateful to him for removing her from it, and substituting one in which she would enjoy luxury and happiness. Independence did not make one among the many benefits which Mr. St. Quentin proposed to bestow upon Miriam ; he did not include it in the bargain, whose items he calculated with the cold-blooded sagacity of a man of business, rather than with the feelings of even an elderly lover. He had not an exalted notion of human nature, and he *had an almost habitual contempt for women, which the*

clever ones among them, with whom he had been brought into contact, detected, under all the gloss of his politeness, and resented by dislike of him. Miriam was clever, but she had not seen enough of him to be able to detect him in this respect, nor had she had sufficient experience. Besides, he did not consciously despise Miriam; his admiration, the feeling which made him court her for his wife, prevented that; but there must be a good deal of potential contempt latent in the mind of a man of Mr. St. Quentin's kind towards a woman who is to be bought.

He would do all sorts of fine things for this handsome girl, if she accepted him—as he had very little doubt she would—in a way to secure her gratitude and good behaviour. She should be splendidly housed, dressed, and served; he would treat her in all respects well; but he would take care that it should be for her interest to behave well to him in return, to consult his wishes in other matters than merely those in which he would have it in his power to enforce them; and to refrain from rendering the difference in their ages a source of annoyance to him. Miriam should have the certainty of wealth and comfort during his lifetime; but whether she should continue to enjoy them after his death, was a point which he deliberately purposed to leave undecided. A wife from whom one does not expect love, had better be encouraged to behave well by fear of one kind or another. Mr. St. Quentin's experience of the motive-power of the love of wealth inspired him with well-founded confidence in that of the fear of poverty. His calculations were not generous, but it would be too much to pronounce them unjust.

No one in existence, save Mr. St. Quentin, knew what his wealth really was, and in what it consisted. All his business matters had been wound up in India, without the assistance of any friend, or of any English man of business. He was in the habit of expressing a strong dislike to lawyers, and a rooted distrust of them; and whenever he boasted—which was not often, for though secretly vain, and fond of his money, he was *not vulgarly* purse-proud—of anything connected with the

acquisition of his fortune, it was of the care and persistence with which he had avoided them. To owe nothing to any sagacity save his own, to transact his own business, and keep his own counsel, had been Mr. St. Quentin's rule of action ; and it certainly had resulted in just the kind and degree of success which his cold and selfish nature appreciated.

No man ever suffered less from the pressure of family ties than Mr. St. Quentin, and his estimation of that item in his fate was high and candid. Miriam might have been much handsomer and more charming than she was, without inducing Mr. St. Quentin to think of marrying her, had she been one of a numerous family, or had she been troubled with strong family affections. That her chief feeling about her father was a vivid desire and firm purpose to get away from him as soon as possible, and that any place in the world would be preferable, in her eyes, to her present home, were great points in her favour, in his opinion. He knew nothing about the attachment which existed between her and her brother ; for Miriam never talked of Walter, and Mr. St. Quentin thought women were certain to talk on any subject which really interested them. Walter Clint had behaved ill, and his father had got rid of him, and it did not matter to Miriam. Thus, erroneously, did the calculating suitor sum up the situation. The error was an important one, but he was not destined to find it out then. That which was of most import to him was that, in marrying Miriam, he should incur no responsibility beyond herself. The longer he contemplated the project, the more it pleased him, and the less he apprehended any difficulty in carrying it out.

Mr. St. Quentin had contrived that he should not lose sight of his friends in Hampshire, or be lost sight of by them, during his absence, which he resolved to make as brief as possible. He speedily found means to open a friendly correspondence with Miriam, *apropos* of Miss Monitor. Mr. and Mrs. Dibley had been as good as their word, and a pupil, with whose parents Mr. St. Quentin was acquainted, was on her way to

London, for consignment to Crescent House, Hampstead. Hence a visit on the part of Miriam's new acquaintance, enthusiastic commendation of Miriam on the part of Miss Monitor, and a letter from that lady to her former pupil, in which the amiability, the charming manners, the high principles, the accurate and elevated ideas on educational subjects, and the general delightfulness of Mr. St. Quentin, were enlarged upon in glowing terms. Miriam's new acquaintance had, in fact, thoroughly pumped Miriam's old friend, and had derived from the operation the confirmation of his belief that Miriam would gladly accept that alternative to her life at The Firs which he could offer her, and that he could not have found a more isolated and unfriended woman on whom to bestow his bounty, and over whom to exercise his power, if he had been deliberately seeking one.

Mr. St. Quentin did not consider that he was acting foolishly in making up his mind to marry Miriam after a week's acquaintance. A week, or a year, he thought, would be all the same in point of any real knowledge of her character to be acquired before marriage. It was always, under such circumstances, a masquerade. Besides, he did not care much about her character. She was clever and spirited, lady-like and amusing—he had seen all that in much less than a week—but he did care very much about her beauty, which was a patent fact, requiring no time to develop. He had never admired any woman so much, not even in his early days; not even his first wife, a pretty, sentimental person, of whom he had speedily wearied, totally different from Miriam in style and in mind, so far as he knew Miriam's mind. There had been very little of his first wife's mind to know; in her case, heart had preponderated, and to a man of Mr. St. Quentin's sort, heart becomes very tiresome.

Two or three polite notes to Miriam; some parcels of choice seeds and cuttings for the garden in which Mrs. Cooke delighted; a few judicious messages to Mr. Clint, referring to his promise of *friendly offices in respect to the place in Hampshire—now,*

in reality, the last county in all England in which Mr. St. Quentin would think of settling—kept up the requisite communication with them all. Miriam understood the meaning of all this perfectly, and acquiesced in it. Day by day her mind was hardening, and her conscience wilfully closing against the sense of the sin against herself and womanhood she was contemplating. If she could have endured her father's temper, and the internal wretchedness of her home, she could not have endured the *ennui* of her surroundings, the dulness, the narrowness of the existence to which she was condemned. The spirit of revolt was strong within her, but stronger still the love of pleasure, of a full, luxurious, variegated life, the realization of what she now only fancied, in her crude, school-girl way. The temptation, which at first had had only one source, now gathered strength from several, and shut out every consideration beyond its allurements. During the few months which had elapsed since Miriam left school, she had matured with surprising rapidity. Her father observed this, and, in some strange way, it influenced him. It ought to have come as naturally to Mr. Clint to bully a woman as a girl, but it did not. He avoided her perhaps more, but he bullied her decidedly less.

Florence was not completely in Miriam's confidence. The trust which Walter Clint had reposed in his sister she had amply justified by her unvarying kindness, her delicate consideration, her genuine affection for her sister-in-law. But the false position in which her husband's expedient had placed Florence oppressed her gentle and submissive spirit, and put her at a disadvantage with Miriam, whose far more daring and unscrupulous nature held retrospection, faltering in any purpose, hesitation in any line of action once adopted, in disdain. Florence's first feeble remonstrance, if it could be called a remonstrance at all, was her only one. Miriam's preoccupied manner; her frequent musing smiles, as if caused by her following imaginary scenes of pleasure with deliberate fancy; her comparative indifference to the discomforts of her home;

in the politest terms : it is impossible but that she will refuse him."

"I don't agree with you," replied his wife. "I am not sure that Miriam will be taken by surprise by his proposal, and I am disposed to think she will accept him. It is a horrid thing, I acknowledge," she continued, correctly interpreting the condemnatory shake of her husband's head ; "but, after all, it is not for us to judge what price it is worth Miriam's while to pay for a final escape from The Firs."

On the day before that on which Mr. St. Quentin was to dine at The Firs, Florence was engaged in some of the light tasks which her assumed character imposed upon her, and was going about them with less than her usual composure. She was expecting a letter from Walter ; the time which he had calculated must elapse before she could hear from him had expired. The letters he had written to her during the fortnight previous to his departure rested day and night in her bosom, and formed her constant solace and delight ; but she was wearying now for one to add to them, one which should tell her of his safety, of the auspicious commencement of his life in the New World. She was grateful for the kindness she met with, thankful and resigned ; but she wondered sometimes whether, though his life was the harder, the preponderance of weariness was not in hers. The chariot-wheels of time "drave heavily" with her. There was weariness in her eyes and on her lips, and impatience in her movements, as she sorted collars, and cuffs, and ribbons into their proper places, and smoothed out tumbled muslin skirts.

Miriam came suddenly into the room, with a quick step and an elated, agitated manner. Her right hand was partly hidden in the folds of her dress, but Florence saw that it held a letter. "Is it from Walter?" she asked, before Miriam could speak, and dropping a cloud of muslin out of her hands.

"From Walter? No. Oh ! my dear Rose, I beg your pardon ; I am so sorry to have caused you such a disappoint-

ment ; but you know there's no post until to-morrow : to-day's came in hours ago."

"I ought to have known," said Florence faintly : "Tell me what it is."

"I'll tell you something else first," said Miriam, nodding at her with comic gravity : "the writer of this will never cause such tender agitation, and oblivion of postal regulations. Sit down ; stop shaking ; never mind that gown, and listen to the first proposal of marriage I have ever received."

"First proposal !"

"Yes, and last, I suppose, for I mean to say yes."

"It is from—"

"Wait a minute : you shall hear the whole production, and see the signature."

And then Miriam, having seated herself on the edge of her bed, with more of her old school-girl gesture and air about her than had been observable for a long time, read out to her sister-in-law a letter from Mr. St. Quentin, in which, in formal, but dignified and graceful terms, he asked her to become his wife.

"Look," she went on, laughing ; "there's the signature. Not very satisfactory—is it ? L. C. St. Quentin. I shall have to ask him what his Christian name is : not that I shall ever use it, I'm sure. He will always be Mr. St. Quentin to me, as Mr. Knightley was always Mr. Knightley to Miss Austen's 'Emma,' who 'could not emulate the elegant terseness of Mrs. Elton.' I shall not have precisely the same reason, however. Well, Rose, what do you think of it ?" she asked, with a sudden change of manner. Her careless tone was not quite natural ; and she looked at Florence with furtive uneasiness under her smiles.

"Are you serious ? Do you really mean to accept Mr. St. Quentin ?"

"I am perfectly serious. I mean to accept and marry him, and to live happily ever after."

and more than all these, certain indications that she was by no means so much afraid of her father as she had been—convinced Florence that the “way of escape” had a serious meaning. In her anomalous position, she could acquire but an imperfect knowledge of the chances for and against the success of such an expedient; and, with her customary meekness, she thought her more clever, energetic, and impatient-spirited sister-in-law must be a better judge in the case than she. How a woman could bring herself to marry a man whom she did not love, would remain, in spite of Miriam’s arguments on the special case, a mystery to Florence; but there were many things which she did not understand, and therefore would not condemn. If Miriam should really do this thing, it must remain one of them.

No events occurred at The Firs during this time. Everything was uninteresting, dull, and wretched as usual, while the unseen elements of change and commotion were mustering. Florence was conscious of one slight alteration only in the moral atmosphere of the house—Mr. Clint was not rude or tyrannical in his bearing to her. He made a decided difference in his treatment of her from that which he bestowed on the other servants. His daughter’s maid was, to be sure, not often brought into contact with him, but he had had a slight attack of illness after she had been some weeks at The Firs, and Florence, seeing that Miriam was totally inefficient as a nurse, had tended him kindly and skilfully. Mr. Clint was not insensible to qualities exercised directly for his own advantage, and he expressed to Miriam his sense of Rose’s value, with a characteristic comment upon the superiority in usefulness of the maid over the mistress. Miriam, whom the rebuke did not affect in the least, repeated the panegyric to Florence; and added that it would be a capital thing for Walter if she (Florence) could contrive to get into his father’s good graces on her own account.

“And it would be good fun too,” said Miriam, who enjoyed the *équivoque* of the position after a fashion unintelligible to

poor Florence. "Fancy your captivating papa into forgiving Walter, and giving you both his blessing, after the good old fashion of the good old drama! Wouldn't it be delicious! I never heard him speak so civilly to any one in my life; and he actually asked me if your room was comfortable, and whether you liked your place! Depend on it, Rose, you will be the making of Walter's fortunes yet."

Florence shook her head sorrowfully. "I have only marred them hitherto," she said.

"Nonsense! You have done nothing of the kind. 'Walter would never have come to any good if it had not been for you. He would just have grown more and more disgusted and dissipated, and gone to the bad altogether. I am as sure as I can be of anything, that only you could have induced him to undertake anything so laborious and self-denying as what he has undertaken."

All this was consolatory to Florence, but she rated Lawrence Daly's influence more highly than her own. Miriam knew little about her brother's friend and comrade. Florence had not much talent for description, and he had rarely been mentioned between them.

"I am very glad you don't blame me," was her meek reply.

A few days later, Mr. St. Quentin returned to the neighbourhood of The Firs. On this occasion he took rooms at the inn; and very shortly after his arrival, when he called on Mr. Clint, and received an invitation to dinner, he took his former hostess into his confidence, and informed her that he intended to propose to Miriam.

The conduct of their impracticable neighbour with respect to his son had inspired Mr. and Mrs. Cooke with judicious reluctance to have anything to do with his family affairs. But this did not affect Mr. St. Quentin; he in no wise required their good offices, and had no intention of asking them.

"She will refuse him, of course," said the Rev. John Cooke to his wife, when they had expressed the invariable sentiments

in the politest terms : it is impossible but that she will refuse him."

"I don't agree with you," replied his wife. "I am not sure that Miriam will be taken by surprise by his proposal, and I am disposed to think she will accept him. It is a horrid thing, I acknowledge," she continued, correctly interpreting the condemnatory shake of her husband's head ; "but, after all, it is not for us to judge what price it is worth Miriam's while to pay for a final escape from The Firs."

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"Are you serious ? Do you really mean to accept Mr. St. Quentin ?"

"I am perfectly serious. I mean to accept and marry him, and to live happily ever after."

"Then there is no use in my telling you what I think of it."

"Not the least, if what you think is that I had better not do it. Take it as a *fait accompli*, you dear sentimental little thing!"—here Miriam pulled Florence towards her and kissed her—"and bear this in mind, at all events: however this business may turn out for me, I've determined it shall be a good thing for you and Walter."

CHAPTER XI.

NEGOTIATIONS.

MR. ST. QUENTIN'S letter was a very proper one under the circumstances. It said more of the writer's feelings and hopes, and of the recipient's merits and attractions, and less of the equivalent advantages in his own power to bestow, than was actually in his thoughts; but that was all as it should be. There was a proper reference to the disparity of age which might, he feared, render his addresses unwelcome to Miss Clint; and an assurance that, should this not prove an unsurmountable obstacle, she should experience to the full all the happiness which being "an old man's darling" could confer. It was wisely and gracefully done, and it told immensely with Miriam; though she guessed, correctly, that Mr. St. Quentin did not suspect she had divined his real age. The proper amount of sentiment, and as much good sense as could co-exist with the contemplation of such a marriage at all, combined to make the letter a creditable production; and Miriam, worldly-minded, ambitious, and untaught by any true love, as she was, felt, on reading it, that she had achieved her purpose—gained a great prize.

If Miss Clint would permit him to do so, Mr. St. Quentin proposed to call on Mr. Clint on the following morning, so that, should all things cohere according to his most ardent wishes, he might have the happiness of appearing at the dinner-party (which was to include the customary guests only) in the character of her accepted suitor. It was all perfectly proper and business-like, and it filled Florence with painful amazement and misgiving. Humble as her little romance had been, *there was genuine feeling, true poetry, the "purple light*

of love " in it. What there was in this she did not like, she could not approve, she was forced to fear. Miriam was not at all concerned respecting her father's probable sentiments. If he opposed her marriage, she would have plenty of courage to oppose him. With the prospect of emancipation before her, her fear of him finally vanished.

Miriam's reply to Mr. St. Quentin's letter was in its turn a model of propriety, though it was as unlike what she would once have imagined as her first letter to her future husband as it could be. It was as follows—

"DEAR MR. ST. QUENTIN,

"I consider myself honoured by your letter; and I have no objection to your calling on my father to-morrow, in order to discuss the subject of it with him.—Yours, very sincerely,
MIRIAM CLINT."

She handed the open sheet on which those lines were written in her firm, large hand, to Florence, who read them slowly, and gave the paper back to her.

"Miriam," she said, infringing her own rule for the first time, "can you not wait a little? You have seen so few people as yet. You spoke of this as a way of escape. Granted—but it is not the only way—another, and a better, may come."

"No, no," said Miriam, as she carefully folded, sealed, and directed her letter. "I must not trifle with fortune. I am not at all likely to get such a chance as this again."

She despatched the letter; and Florence felt that the last word had been spoken. It was not until Miriam had left her, to go down to dinner, that Florence thought of her own possible or probable share in the matter. How might it affect her? What alteration might it produce in the position in which Walter had left her? Would it be in Miriam's power to continue to protect her? These were painful but inevitable speculations; and Florence sat absorbed in them, waiting for *Miriam's* return.

When Miriam found herself alone with her father on the

conclusion of their dinner, she addressed him with composure which surprised herself.

"Papa," she said, "I have something particular to say to you. A circumstance has occurred which concerns me very nearly"

"Indeed! What's the circumstance?"

"Mr. St. Quentin has asked me to marry him."

"What? Mr. St. Quentin, a man who is fully as old as I am, or, I suspect, a trifle older, propose to a girl of not quite nineteen! What does he mean?"

"What he says, I presume. Pray, let me speak, papa, and let us understand each other. Mr. St. Quentin, who is, as you say, very much older than I am, but whom I respect and esteem, has asked me to marry him. If you have no objection to my doing so, except Mr. St. Quentin's age, that concerns *me* only, and I do not regard it as an obstacle."

"Oh! you don't, don't you? You're not a sentimental young lady, then, at least."

"No, papa, I am not a sentimental young lady; I have no nonsense of that kind about me; and I am very anxious to have a home of my own. Since I am speaking to you about myself, I may as well speak plainly, and above-board. I am not happy here; I never expected to be happy, I am not so; and I hope you will not refuse to let me avail myself of this means of leaving your house creditably."

"Which means, I conclude, that otherwise you will contrive to leave it discreditably, like your precious brother!"

Mr. Clint had risen, and was walking about the room with quick strides. Miriam, whose face was very pale and set, and in whose eyes there was an expression unfamiliar to her father, replied quietly,—

"I have long ago come to the resolution not to discuss Walter or his conduct with you, papa, and by that resolution I mean to abide. In this matter he is not concerned, and he need not be mentioned. I am quite sure you do not care for my remaining with you, and I tell you plainly I am most anxious to get away."

"I have certainly been blessed with a pair of dutiful children," said Mr. Clint bitterly, but, to Miriam's great relief, not violently. "However, that is not worth discussing. I understand you wish to obtain my consent to your marrying this Mr. St. Quentin, a man as old as I am, of whom we know nothing but that he talks of himself as wealthy, and seems to have plenty of money. You 'respect and esteem' him, do you? A very pretty phrase; but it means that you covet his money, and think, by marrying him, you will secure the kind of life you fancy you would like, and your own way in everything."

"I daresay you may be right, papa, but that is beside the question. The friends who introduced Mr. St. Quentin to Mr. and Mrs. Cooke are well acquainted with his position and fortune. They are what he represents them. I do not think you can have looked forward to any better provision for me than the one he offers me, and I wish to know whether you will receive him, in accordance with his request, to-morrow?"

Her father took two or three turns in silence, before he replied, "There's not much room for discussion, Miriam. If I have not been very kind to you, according to your notions, at least I have not troubled you with much advice or dictation. I don't mean to do so now. Let Mr. St. Quentin satisfy me that he has the fortune he pretends to have, and let him make a handsome settlement on you, and I shall not prevent your marrying him, though I'm d——d if I can understand you."

Miriam instantly rose.

"Thank you papa," she said calmly; "that is all I require. I shall tell Mr. St. Quentin you will see him."

"You had better tell him my terms too," shouted Mr. Clint; but Miriam had already passed through the door, and might pretend to be out of hearing.

Miriam was in a strange mood all that evening. Sometimes *she* was pleased and excited, chattering to Florence about *London*, her intention of having a house there, her carriages

and horses, her dress and her amusements; but, above all, the delightful prospect of leaving The Firs. Then she would talk of Walter, of all she meant to do for him, how he should come home, and he and Florence live with her, until all should be set right with his father, and everything be arranged as it ought to be. Florence was not very much more experienced in the ways of the world than Miriam, but she had a clear perception that this was all romance and imagination, and she ventured to suggest to Miriam that perhaps Mr. St. Quentin might not see these matters in the same light. But Miriam would not listen to a doubt on that point. She did not put her sentiments into so direct a formula; but what she really meant was this: "I am going to marry an old man for his money, and to get my own way, and it would be rather too bad if I could not make him do precisely as I please!"

Florence, seeing that she could not make any impression upon her, was forced to content herself with reminding Miriam that no revelation of her secret must be made to Mr. St. Quentin without Walter's consent, which it would take some time to obtain. To this Miriam assented, and then Florence approached the subject which was chiefly occupying her thoughts.

"What is to become of me," she said, "during the interval before we can hear from Walter? I suppose your marriage will soon take place?"

"I suppose so," replied Miriam. "But, of course, I can't tell. But, Rose, there need be no trouble or difficulty about *you*. You will come with me, of course, wherever I go. You will be under less difficulty when I am in a house of my own than you are here. Then I can arrange so that there shall be nothing at all unpleasant in your position, and we shall soon be able to announce the truth."

"Pray don't deceive yourself; pray don't buoy yourself and me up with false hopes. If Mr. St. Quentin were to realize all your expectations of his generosity—and I think you must acknowledge they are extravagant—it would be madness for

Walter to confess his marriage now, and throw himself upon Mr. St. Quentin's kindness. In fact, he could not do it; it would be the worst kind of dependence. Our secret must be maintained, and the only thing you can do for me will be to take me with you as your maid."

"Well, be it so. You are determined to damp my spirits; but you shall not succeed. I have a presentiment that everything will go well with me, and with Walter too."

Florence smiled.

"And you have a presentiment," she said, "that Mr. St. Quentin will not object to your having a confidential maid, to whom you are kinder and more considerate than ever lady yet was?"

"I have a presentiment, Rose, that Mr. St. Quentin will not interfere with either my feelings or my actions towards you. I shall make you as happy as you can be made, away from Walter, and Mr. St. Quentin had much better not interfere with me."

"And I will keep my distance and my place, and endeavour to give him no cause."

Then the sisters-in-law talked of other things, each feeling relieved that the momentous subject of discussion was laid aside for the present. When Miriam and Florence had parted for the night, the young wife went with a heavy, but trustful heart to her nightly prayers, while the young girl could not go through the form of words. She had no great refinement of mind or sensitiveness of conscience, but she felt that she could not ask a blessing on the events of that day. Afterwards, it would come more easily to do so, when she should be better used to regarding Mr. St. Quentin as her future husband. Thus did Miriam cheat herself, and belie the common-sense that she possessed.

Mr. St. Quentin made his appearance at The Firs on the following day, very accurately dressed, and, to all appearance, in a state of perfect composure and self-complacency. *Miriam and Florence witnessed his arrival from Miriam's sitting-room.*

His equipage was a well-appointed mail-phaeton, and he drove the handsome pair of high-stepping bays himself, with an air which had just a little too much of the *ci-devant jeune homme* about it, but which did very well indeed for such inexperienced critics as the sisters-in-law. A magnificent bouquet of hot-house flowers, as carefully carried by a groom as if it had been somebody's son and heir, was immediately brought to Miss Clint, and she was informed that Mr. St. Quentin was in the study with Mr. Clint.

The interview between the two gentlemen lasted longer than Miriam expected, or liked. If they had agreed, there was so little to discuss that she had expected it would have been over in a very short time. She knew her father was a man of few words, and she concluded, naturally and correctly, that her elderly suitor would not be unduly anxious to prolong the conversation. Florence had stolen away, and left her alone, and she sat, or rather crouched, on a low oaken settle, which filled up the recess formed by the old-fashioned window, with her elbows on the sill, looking out at the carriage; at the natty groom who stood at the horses' heads; at the fine, spirited animals, champing their bits, and tossing their heads, and throwing frequent flecks of foam about; at the costly fur rugs; at the silver mountings of the harness—a little too much becrested—in a word, at the symbol of wealth before her eyes; and, while there was a strange sort of throbbing at her heart, she thought how nice it would be to own this, and the riches of which it represented only a very small portion.

The interview between Mr. Clint and the mature suitor for his young daughter's hand commenced with some mutual embarrassment, though with much less on Mr. St. Quentin's part than on that of Miriam's father. The superior knowledge of the world and the business habits of the elderly lover told, as against the morose, awkward self-engrossment of Reginald Clint, whose native manner was rudeness, as his ruling impulse of mind was distrust.

Preliminaries being despatched, Mr. St. Quentin proceeded to inform Mr. Clint that he proposed to make Miriam an allowance of five hundred pounds a year during his lifetime—he entered on this branch of the subject without any inquiry into Miriam’s own possessions or prospects—but that he did not intend to make a settlement upon her.

“Then,” said Mr. Clint, “that must put an end to the matter. I will not allow my daughter to marry without a settlement.”

“I beg you to be patient for a moment,” said Mr. St. Quentin. “I do not ask you for any fortune with Miss Clint.”

“No,” returned Mr. Clint testily; “and it would be no good if you did. Miriam shall not have a penny of my money until after my death. I don’t mean to part with my money, or any of it, unless I see a very sound reason why. I don’t see such a reason in my daughter’s marriage, which will remove her from me, and deprive me of any care or attention I might wish to receive from her in the decline of my life.”

Mr. St. Quentin listened with something approaching to a grin on his features, and with all the sentiments which would call forth such an expression in his mind, but he merely inclined his head, as a signal that he was listening, and said nothing.

“I have no faith in anything but self-interest, Mr. St. Quentin,” continued Mr. Clint, with some additional surliness; “and I mean my daughter, and my daughter’s husband, to have an interest in behaving well to me.”

“If I am so happy as to become Miss Clint’s husband, I hope we shall always be good friends.”

“That’s not the question. You say you do not ask me to give Miriam money, and I say I never intended to give her any; but when you add that you refuse to make a settlement on Miriam, that is another thing, and I tell you plainly that I will not consent to my daughter’s marrying you under the *circumstances*—there must be no uncertainty for her.”

"I hope you will not persist in this view, Mr. Clint; and I think I may perhaps modify it by a little plain-speaking. You consider it right to control a daughter by considerations of self-interest; is it altogether wrong to keep similar considerations before the mind of a wife very much younger than her husband? I have the profoundest admiration and the deepest regard for Miss Clint; my most earnest desire is to make her my wife, but I do not ask or expect from her a romantic attachment, which would be absurd and unnatural. A beautiful and well-conducted young wife is a prize such as seldom falls in the way of a man of my age; but I think I am justified in declining to make her completely independent of me, in declining to put it entirely out of my own power to influence her by hopes or fears for the future" (here he spoke with slight but significant slowness). "I only claim what you claim, the right to make the disposition of my fortune conditional upon the degree of happiness I derive from the person who will be the probable inheritor of it. There is not a shadow of probability that my widow will not be the inheritor. I have no relatives, to speak of—my heir-at-law is a distant cousin, whom I have never seen, for whom I have already done all I ever intend to do, and whom I never purpose to see. I have all the feelings towards Miss Clint which justify me in asking for her hand, and I naturally have undoubting faith in their continuance; but I have made up my mind in this instance, as in that of my former marriage, not to make any woman who shall become my wife so independent of me as to feel that she has nothing to gain by consulting my wishes and studying my happiness, and nothing to lose by my death."

Mr. Clint's face, during this lengthy explanation of Mr. Quentin's views, delivered with perfect calmness and well-bred ease, was curious to behold. There was cynical admiration in it combined with dislike; he was puzzled, baffled, and yet not wholly displeased.

"He is a cooler hand than even I thought him," was the silent reflection of Mr. Clint, as he attended to the irreproach-

able discourse, and scanned the irreproachable person and attire of his would-be son-in-law. "Who would think that a man would do so foolish a thing in so perfectly sensible a way! He is one of 'the wisest fools in Christendom,' surely."

He did not reply immediately, and Mr. St. Quentin exhibited no signs of haste or impatience, though he felt both. He had a pleasant conviction that, backed by Miriam's determination to accept him, he should be more than a match for Mr. Clint. He did not fear her being deterred by his reluctance to settle an income upon her, because he judged it impossible that a young girl could understand its significance, and he was very anxious to join her in the character of her betrothed. Mr. Clint made him, after a pause, the exact answer he would have most earnestly desired, but had not ventured to anticipate. He said,—

"I don't deny there is a great deal of reason in what you say. Suppose we refer the question of a settlement to Miriam. You offer good terms for the rest, and if she's disposed to risk it, perhaps I may be also."

Mr. St. Quentin gracefully acceded ; and after a little further discussion of his circumstances, his views as to a residence, and his projects for the embellishment of Miriam's existence, in which her father was but moderately interested, the suitor requested permission to see Miss Clint.

Mr. Clint, who was very glad to get rid of his visitor, told him he would find Miriam in the drawing-room, but evidently had no intention of accompanying him thither, and dismissed him with a reference to their meeting again at dinner.

Miriam was in the drawing-room, looking very handsome, and just becomingly agitated. She rose instinctively as Mr. St. Quentin came into the room, and her downcast eyes and brilliant blush were in as perfect taste as if they had been assumed for the occasion. Nothing could be better than the demeanour of the elderly lover, as he advanced with a *hurried* step and a smile of triumph, and taking the hand *which she neither offered nor withdrew*, fervently kissed it.

CHAPTER XII.

EMANCIPATION.

IN the small circle within which the affairs of the household at The Firs produced discussion, the intelligence of Miriam Clint's approaching marriage was received with some diversity of opinion, but with general curiosity. There was considerable inclination to depreciate Mr. St. Quentin's wealth, and to wonder how a girl of Miriam's age could be so mercenary. Mr. and Mrs. Cooke, however, took her part in all discussions; and the general dislike entertained towards her father pleaded for her, as the same sentiment had pleaded for Walter, in the very different direction which his wilfulness had given to his own fate.

It has been seen that Mr. St. Quentin had a rational dislike to delay in the transaction of any business at his time of life, and it followed, therefore, as a matter of course, that he was anxious his rash but successful proposal to Miriam should be followed as speedily as possible by their marriage. He found his hopes of her acquiescence in the arrangement which her father disapproved, were well-founded. Miriam was quite content to forego a settlement, although her father told her, in the most amicable and unrestrained conversation they had ever had together, that he considered her a fool for yielding, and had no doubt, if she would only hold out, Mr. St. Quentin would give in. It was evident that the elderly gentleman was very much in love; the "admiration" and "regard" he had expressed had developed themselves into much warmer sentiments, and Miriam was acquiring more and more power.

over him day by day. But she told her father quite frankly that she would not use it in the direction of inducing Mr. St. Quentin to do what he had declared his repugnance to doing. "As long as he lives, I shall have as much money as I want," she said; "and if I survive him, I think I may safely rely upon having enough influence over him to make him leave me well off." Thus the matter was left in abeyance, and the marriage was all arranged without the intervention of one of Mr. St. Quentin's aversions, the lawyers.

"Happy the wooing that's not long o' doing," is an adage, more respectable, perhaps, by reason of its antiquity than of its absolute truth. The wooing, in this case, was effected with as much celerity as was compatible with the care and pains necessarily bestowed upon the important business of purchasing Miriam's *trousseau*. Mr. Clint, having been with difficulty convinced that his daughter could not go up to town for that purpose accompanied by her maid only, was, with still greater difficulty, induced to go with her, and to submit to the infliction of a three weeks' sojourn in very comfortable apartments, secured for them by Miss Monitor, whose pleasure and fussiness at the prospect of her ex-pupil's marriage were extreme. Miss Monitor had always expected her dear Miriam to do well in the matrimonial line, but in doing so very well as this, she had exceeded her fondest hopes. To any suggestion that the bridegroom might, with advantage, have been a trifle younger, Miss Monitor would have turned a deaf ear. There was no danger now of Miriam's being condemned to the rurality which she detested, and Mr. St. Quentin's appearance and manners were as unexceptionable as his position and fortune. Considering that, except on the part of the bridegroom, there was not the least assumption of feeling in the matter, the marriage was all that could be expected.

Mr. St. Quentin was an attentive, gallant, but not importunate lover. He never intruded on Miriam's morning hours. His habits were not matutinal, in which respect he differed from *most Indian men*; and he took a good while to dress. He

did it well, with taste, care, and gravity, and was perfectly alive to the importance of the operation at his time of life. Without the least touch of that detestable creature, the elderly dandy, about him, Mr. St. Quentin always looked, as he was, "well got-up," and precise, from the top of his very slightly bald head to the toe of his well-fitting boots. This sort of thing takes time, and Mr. St. Quentin objected to being hurried. He liked to breakfast leisurely, to read his papers—he never received any letters more interesting than bills and prospectuses—leisurely; to drive to a florist's for Miriam's daily bouquet without hurrying himself, and to present himself at Cambridge Terrace so as to have an interview of half an hour's duration with his betrothed, before they went out for the afternoon's shopping. To Miriam's great satisfaction, she found that Mr. St. Quentin had a liking for theatrical entertainments, and her father did not object to them so strenuously as he objected to most things from which other people derived pleasure. Consequently, the tediousness of an uncongenial association of three, in the evenings, or the awkwardness of a *tête-à-tête* with a lover with whom she was not the least in love, was frequently spared to Miriam. When the party went out in the evenings, Miriam was distressed at being obliged to leave Florence alone, but her sister-in-law consoled her by a perfectly sincere assurance that she never felt lonely. She passed the peaceful hours with her books, her needlework, and the interminable letters to Walter, of which she always had one on hand.

The morning hours being entirely free from intrusion on Mr. St. Quentin's part, and her father holding himself as much aloof from Miriam in town as he did in the country—though their scanty association was less unpleasant—the sisters-in-law went out together, without—the door once closed behind them—keeping up the fiction of their supposed relative position. They enjoyed these expeditions very much; and Florence had early in their sojourn in London, taken Miriam to see the City boarding-house in which she and Walter lived during

the months which immediately succeeded their marriage. They had also gone to the cottage on the Eastern Counties line, and walked up and down the lane, looking tearfully at the tiny garden, and the little window, from which Florence, her fair head framed in climbing roses and honeysuckles, used to watch for Walter in the early summer-time. There were no roses and no green leaves now, and the window was filled up by a ponderous chair, in which sat an imbecile old man, propped up with pillows, who waggled his rickety head at the young women as they lingered near the little gate. It was all so different, so unlike her recollection of it, that Florence was glad to turn away and lose sight of the place.

Miriam especially wished to visit the old house in the dull crescent in Bloomsbury where her brother and Florence had first met, but there were difficulties in the way. To go to the house, and, if there were lodgings to be let there, to go in under pretext of requiring them, would be easy; but, supposing Martha were still in the service of Mrs. Reeve's successors, and that she recognized Florence, as she certainly would, and were thus set gossiping about her to any of Walter's former acquaintances, who knew nothing of his wife's position at present? Miriam acknowledged that this would be a risk, not to be incurred without folly, and it was therefore agreed that she should go alone to the house in the crescent.

One morning when the *trousseau* was almost complete, and the much taxed patience of Mr. Clint was nearly exhausted, Miriam and Florence set out as usual, soon after breakfast. Miriam had not seen her father that morning, but she had an uncomfortable conviction that he was in a specially bad humour. He had made himself almost unbearably disagreeable to Mr. St. Quentin on the previous evening, and had been positively brutal to her. She and Florence had come to the conclusion that he was again taking to solitary drinking, and were wishing that he was at home, where they could bring Mr. Martin's influence to bear upon him. They drove to the well-remembered crescent in Bloomsbury, and directed

the cabman to pull up on the same side as that on which Florence's former home stood, but few doors higher up. These orders were being executed in a slow and lumbering fashion by the driver, and Miriam, her hand on the door of the cab, ready to step out, when a hansom passed them rapidly, and pulled up at the door of the identical house for which Miriam was bound.

"There's some one going in," said Miriam, looking out of the cab window, but not opening the door. "A gentleman. Good gracious, Rose, it's my father!"

"Your father! Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure. There, he has knocked at the door; his back is towards me now.—Don't get down, please" (this to the driver).—"A servant is speaking to him; a tall, dark-haired woman."

"Yes, yes; that's Martha."

"He has gone in, and the door is shut. Rose, what can this mean?"

"I don't know; I am afraid to think! Let us get away as quickly as possible; he may come out."

Miriam directed the bewildered cabman to drive to a shop in Oxford Street, and the two young women sat back in the cab, and looked at one another in amazement. Rose was the first to speak.

"How fortunate you had not got out! How fortunate he did not see you! He has heard something, and gone there to inquire; that must be it! Just think, if Walter had not made me change my name!"

Then they keenly discussed the matter. Could it be a mere coincidence? They could not hope that. What had Mr. Clint heard, how had he heard it? Apprehension and anxiety took hold of them; and Miriam dreaded their being kept in ignorance almost as much as she dreaded the effects of a discovery.

"Depend upon it, we shall not be able to find out, if it's anything short of his knowing the whole truth."

"And if he does know the whole truth—what then?" said Florence, clinging to Miriam, and trembling.

"Then he will turn you out of doors. I hope, I expect nothing less. Oh! Rose, what a blessing it is to think that now it cannot so much matter if he does! Fancy if what we think this is had happened before I knew Mr. St. Quentin! What would have become of us? But now we need not mind—at least, not in comparison; for if he turns you out of his house, you will have mine to come to."

The sisters-in-law had to endure their uncertainty.

Mr. Clint did not come home to luncheon, and Mr. St. Quentin found Miriam in a very absent and unsatisfactory state of mind. There was no evening engagement, and Mr. St. Quentin had not been invited to dinner by her father, so that Miriam had to contemplate a solitary evening with Mr. Clint. Her mind was unusually full of Walter, and she, for the first time, spoke of him freely to Mr. St. Quentin. She was not quite pleased with his manner of receiving what she said. There was a decided absence of sympathy about it, a disposition to interrupt, with florid compliments to herself, her description of the affection which had always subsisted between her and her brother; but no alacrity to echo her conviction that her father had been entirely to blame, and Walter almost blameless in the unfortunate rupture between them. Miriam was disgusted by this, but not alarmed. Old men were so narrow and egotistical, she thought; it was like the sour-grape attitude of mind which they assume when youth has departed from them, to lean heavily on the faults of young men, and ignore their temptations; and, no doubt, her father had taken pains to imbue Mr. St. Quentin with his ideas respecting Walter. This was the only point on which Miriam was mistaken. Her future husband was even more narrow and egotistical than she believed him to be, but he had received no confidences from Mr. Clint. The reserve and coldness with which he listened to Miriam were the genuine expression of his own unassisted sentiments, and a prudent though

silent notification of his intention to stand aloof from the Clint family affairs. In popular phrase, he meant to marry her, and not her relatives.

"Never mind," thought Miriam; "he is under papa's influence now; but when we are away from *him*, he will be under mine, and he *shall* be interested in Walter. One thing is clear; if papa has any real suspicion, he has not imparted it to Mr. St. Quentin."

A little blunder, destined to produce a large result!

Dinner passed over, without anything having occurred, either to relieve Miriam's mind or to confirm her fears; but just as she was about to make her escape, and to join Florence, her father addressed her.

"Miriam, I want to ask you a question. I hope you will tell me the truth."

"I always do tell you the truth, papa."

"Perhaps so. It will be for your own interest, and other people's, if you tell me the truth now. Have you had any letter from your brother since he left England?"

"I have not."

"Had you heard from him shortly before he left?"

"The only letter I had from Walter for six months was the one I showed you, by his desire."

"And—now attend to me, Miriam, and take my assurance that you are likely to do your brother a very great injury, if you mislead me—in any letter which you received from him previously, did he mention to you an entanglement into which he had got himself? Did he confide in you any intention of marriage? Did he ever allude to the daughter of the person in whose house he lodged, a girl of the name of Reeve?"

Miriam's heart was beating loud and fast. She glanced at her father's stern, frowning, discontented face as she thought, "Shall I risk all, and tell him? Have I any right to do so?" However the swift impulse of the minute might have decided the second question, the face she looked at decided

the first in the negative. She dared not tell her father the truth ; a horrid vision of Florence, turned out, destitute and insulted, flashed, with the hesitation, across her. She replied, in the steadiest voice she could muster to the fortunate form in which Mr. Clint had put his questions.

"Walter never told me of any entanglement. He never alluded, to me, to any intention of marriage. He never mentioned any girl's name to me."

Her father looked at her sternly while she was speaking, but she kept her countenance well.

"What address did your brother give you for your letters to him, after he left his lodgings in Thirlwall Crescent ?"

"He never gave me any other address. I did not know he had left them, until I got his last letter."

"He had not lived there for a year previously," said Mr. Clint.

"Indeed !" replied Miriam.

"That will do ; you may go now. I had a reason, which it is unnecessary to explain, for asking you these questions. If ever I discover that you have answered them falsely, it will be so much the worse for you. To your brother it cannot make much difference."

Miriam left him promptly, and burst into tears on the stairs. She paused, to recover herself, before she entered her own room, where she expected to find Florence, in order that she might not alarm her by her agitation. Her mind was in a whirl, but the uppermost feeling was exultation at having kept Walter's counsel, and at the nearness and certainty of her own emancipation. When she had recovered herself, she went into her room, and there she found Florence, looking very pale and ill. She related all that had passed between her father and herself ; but, though it confirmed them in the fear which Mr. Clint's visit to the house in Thirlwall Crescent had awakened, it left them in entire ignorance of the origin and extent of his information.

"*There's nothing to be done,*" said Miriam, "*except to*

keep resolute silence, and go on in the most cautious way possible. For the few days we shall remain in London, you had better go out as little as possible, as papa must have gotten a clue from some one, and it is possible you might be seen and recognized. I wonder we never thought of that danger before. What could have been more unlikely than that we should have seen papa at Thirlwall Crescent? and yet we did see him."

Florence gladly assented; and then they talked the matter over again, each making herself more than ever uneasy and alarmed in the process. The next day, Miriam had recourse to the good offices of the lady of the house in which they were lodging in the matter of her shopping, as her maid had a bad cold, and could not go out.

"Has anything happened?" was Miriam's eager question to Florence, on her return.

"Nothing alarming; only that I have seen more of your father to-day than in all the time since we have been in London. He has been ill again, threatened with gout, I fancy, and sent for me shortly after you went out."

"Was there anything remarkable in his manner?"

"No—nothing. He seemed to be in very low spirits, and was perfectly civil to me—indeed, for him, really kind. You may imagine how frightened I was, and I suppose I looked ill, for he noticed my being pale, said he believed London disagreed with me as much as with him, and wished we were all out of it."

Nothing more occurred to alarm Miriam and Florence. Mr. Clint continued ailing, and they left London a few days sooner than they had intended, in consequence. Mr. St. Quentin did not accompany them. He was to arrive at The Firs on Christmas Eve, and the wedding, which was to be of the quietest description, was to take place at Drington Church on New Year's day. He took leave of his betrothed at the railway station with perfect propriety, and some real feeling. *Miriam was rather pleased to find that she did not experience*

any sensation of relief and pleasure at getting rid of him. It augured well, she thought, for her not finding him a drawback to the comfort of her life in the future.

There was not much comfort in her life in the present, except in such part of it as she passed with Mrs. Cooke. Mr. Clint was apparently bent on indemnifying himself, by additional moroseness and violence, for the concession he had made to propriety by his visit to London, and he was decidedly not well. Her father's looks did not particularly interest Miriam, but urged by Florence, she noticed them, and thought them bad. Mrs. Ritchie commented to her mistress upon the change, observing that "Mr. Clint was fallen away to nothing," and now it was the general experience of the household that his temper was "uncommon short."

The interval before Miriam's marriage passed over. Mr. St. Quentin duly arrived on Christmas Eve, and took up his abode with Mr. and Mrs. Cooke—having succeeded in effecting a restoration of external civilities between the Parsonage and The Firs. He brought Miriam a wedding present of very fine and tastefully selected jewels; and his demeanour was unexceptionable. Mr. St. Quentin had endured an English winter, during its milder half, very well; but he had no intention of exposing himself to the rigours of the first five months of the new year, and had therefore arranged to take his bride abroad immediately after their marriage. The hour fixed for the wedding was unusually early, in order to enable the happy pair to cross from Southampton to Havre on the same day.

The first day of the new year dawned, cold, frosty, but bright. Florence dressed Miriam in her bridal garments, with her usual quiet alacrity, but with a heavy heart. Miriam looked very beautiful, and quite composed on her wedding morning. The party assembled to witness the ceremony was small, but the church was crowded with the village people.

The bridegroom was not so completely a secondary object of *popular curiosity* in this case as bridegrooms generally are.

Everybody wanted to see him ; and everybody was surprised when he or she did see him. Here was not "feeble old age tottering to the altar to unite itself to mercenary and unblushing youth," as the prospective union had been characterized in certain circles of the neighbourhood. Here was an upright, remarkably well-looking, perfectly dressed man, whom no one in the church would believe to be a day over fifty—how could people be so absurd as to say he was as old as the bride's father!—all devotion and gallantry to the bride. Certainly she was very young and pretty, but she was uncommonly lucky too. The marriage became popular on the spot.

Miriam was becomingly nervous, but, for all that, elated and happy ; and as she passed through the gates on her way back to The Firs, she looked out of the carriage window eagerly.

"Not a regretful glance, I trust?" said the bridegroom, pressing her hand tenderly.

"Oh! dear, no," said Miriam. "I was just wondering whether any one in the world who had lived so long in any place, ever felt so delighted to get away from it, for ever, as I do!"

The wedding breakfast was over, the few guests were longing to be off, the travelling-carriage was at the door, and Mrs. St. Quentin was supposed to be changing her dress. She was really locked in the arms of Florence, who was also ready for the journey, and listening to her entreaties that she would be very careful and cautious, remembering that she must expect Mr. St. Quentin to behave to her as to any ordinary servant ; and also hearing the delightful news that, while Miriam was at the church, the morning post had brought Florence a letter from Walter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CLOVEN FOOT.

MIRIAM'S married life commenced under pleasant auspices. Mr. St. Quentin had taken care to procure numerous introductions in the foreign cities which he purposed to visit; and as society was as complete a novelty to his young wife as the works of art and the monuments of history, she was amply provided with defences against *ennui*, and with the means of contrasting her present with her late position, largely to the advantage of the former. She had made an entirely mercenary marriage, and she did not deceive herself about it; but as she was not of a sentimental turn of mind, she really was, for a time, quite happy. If she had ever been in love with any one, it might have been a very different thing, as she had once said to Florence, and repeated unnecessarily often to herself; but beyond a school-girl flirtation with Charlie Boscombe, carried on by all the underhand means familiar to school-girls, and enjoyable and important chiefly because it was underhand, Miriam had no experience of that kind. Mr. St. Quentin was an agreeable travelling companion; and Miriam was too inexperienced to discern that all the comfort and luxury, all the consideration and courtesy with which he surrounded her, were rather tributes to his own vanity, selfishness, and love of ease, than to her. No doubt he loved her, after his fashion, and was very proud of her beauty, her youth, and the general admiration she excited; and so far as he was concerned, she looked no deeper into her life. Her character was not yet formed, its strength for good or ill was still latent; though she *had shown herself* capable of a deliberately mercenary mar-

riage, and of telling herself always and exactly the truth about it. At present, the instincts of her youth, health, and spirits were dominant, and she made the most of the absolutely new life which had opened for her. It did seem strange to her, in the rare intervals in which thought and reflection would obtrude themselves, to be actually married to a man, sharing his present life, the nominal partner of every interest and every possession belonging to him, and yet to know so very little of his past as she knew of Mr. St. Quentin's.

She was set thinking of this by her long talks with her sister-in-law, and by discovering that though she too was now a married woman, and on the same level of experience of life as Florence, she was not, in reality, a bit more like her in mind, or drawn closer to her in sympathies. Florence knew as much of Walter's history, of his childhood and his boyhood, his school-days and companions, of the troubles, and hopes, and pranks of the time before he had ever seen her, as Miriam did; and, of the later incidents, much more than Miriam herself knew. Every name which had been a household word to Miriam and Walter was familiar to Florence; and at The Firs she had recognized all the localities, and illustrated them by anecdotes related to her by Walter, and cherished in her memory with a fidelity quite mysterious to her sister-in-law, who had not the key to it. Miriam knew nothing about Mr. St. Quentin's youth or early manhood. Perhaps the difference in their age rendered it natural that she should feel no curiosity to know, and that he should take no interest in telling her; but yet the fact rendered their relation artificial and constrained. Miriam did not suppose that her husband had anything to conceal; she did not weave a romance out of her ignorance and his reticence, and, after the fashion of Miss Austen's charming heroine in "*Northanger Abbey*," construct a martyred wife and a reproachful conscience out of a commonplace character and a life of monotonous prosperity. But she felt that he told her nothing because he held her in light *consideration*. She did not mind it—it is only love

which aims at the knowledge and comprehension of the past—but she learned from the fact how great a distance divides the experience of a woman who has married “for love” from that of a woman who has married from any other motive.

“If Mr. St. Quentin and I had not strange places and new people to discuss, I wonder what we should find to talk about?” said Miriam, one evening, when Rose was arranging her hair—a portion of her assumed duty which she persisted in discharging. “What did you and Walter talk about?”

“About ourselves, I’m afraid : about our want of money, and the very little prospect we had of getting any ; about how glad we were we had run the risks involved in our marriage, and about all the things we would do if we were rich. Very commonplace, but interesting to us. And then, we talked a good deal about you—I always wanted to hear about you—and Walter always had something to tell me. He was a most amusing and entertaining companion, as you know ; I never could have been dull with his society to count upon ; and he is such a wonderful mimic. He would have made a capital actor. Do you know, I should have recognized your voice in a crowd, from his perfect imitation of it.”

“Ah !” said Miriam, leaning back in her chair with an impatient sigh, “Mr. St. Quentin and I will never have anything half so interesting to discuss. There is not a third person in the world he would care to hear me talk of ; and, except the most ordinary acquaintances, he never talks of any third person to me. I wonder what sort of woman his first wife was ? I wonder whether that was a love-match ? I wonder what he was like then ?”

“You could hardly expect him to tell you much, or indeed anything about her,” said Florence ; “he would probably think the subject not a pleasant one.”

“What nonsense ! as if I cared, as if any rational being would care ! It would be a relief to have something real to talk about, for at present I feel as if it were all a sham. However, *we are not likely to be reduced to the necessity of entertaining*

each other. And now for a good ten minutes of compliments, in lieu of conversation."

She drew her white and gold mantle over her shoulders, kissed Florence, and went wearily away. They were going to a great entertainment that evening at the house of the English Minister at Naples; and Mr. St. Quentin was more than usually anxious that Miriam should be well-dressed and in good looks.

At Miriam's age, even if a woman has a fair allowance of good sense, she can endure a great amount of admiration and attention on the score of her beauty. But these tributes, in themselves welcome, are apt to pall after a time, unless they come from the right person. Miriam was beginning to find out that Mr. St. Quentin was not the right person, and she was very tired—when her husband had repeated the assurance several times a day for three months—of being told that she was as beautiful as an angel, and that each dress she wore was more becoming to her "style" than the preceding one. This was a slight annoyance, however, and the monotony of Mr. St. Quentin's admiration was atoned for by the variety of that which Miriam received from other sources. They had travelled rapidly to the south, in pursuit of fine weather, and were now settled for some time at Naples. Mr. St. Quentin reserved his morning hours to his own special benefit, as rigidly as he had done in London, to Miriam's great pleasure and relief; and she really had as little to complain of as was possible. The gloss was upon her new life of wealth, and ease, and luxury, and she had as yet been visited by only a momentary occasional thrill of apprehension that it might ever wear off. She was accustomed, in her conversations with Florence, to revert to the great "consideration" of her emancipation from The Firs, to her being "rid of the place and of papa," more frequently than was quite pleasant to Florence, who had always feared that she would need constant remembrance of that "consideration." Miriam was unconscious of these *symptoms*, and had she recognized them, would still have

been ignorant of the nature and gravity of the disease they betokened.

Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin excited a good deal of curiosity, and, as was to be expected, some not altogether good-natured comment. But it was generally admitted that he was a model husband, devoted to his beautiful young wife, and yet so little foolish, so charmingly free from jealousy—a passion which would have rendered him equally unhappy and absurd, because, at his age, to expect a young girl like Miriam to do more than tolerate him, would, of course, be quite ridiculous. And she tolerated him—she really did! The manners of Madame were perfectly charming—so attentive, so pleasant, so reverential! If Mr. St. Quentin had been aware of these comments, he would have been very little obliged to the discerning individuals who made them. Miriam's enjoyment of society was very general; as yet, she was not in danger of any particular attraction. As a rule, she did not like "foreigners,"—as she, in her thoroughly English way, designated French and Italian people in their own respective countries—and the English whom they met did not interest her deeply. The fact was, Miriam was still so young, and so much occupied and delighted with material things, that she was as yet preserved from the real and deadly danger of her position—the danger of finding out that her unoccupied heart was craving a tenant. She honestly supposed all old men were as tiresome as Mr. St. Quentin, and she did not think about young men at all. If she had thought about them, or any one of them, the general notion of propriety, which stood in the place of sound principle in Miriam's mind, would have precluded the idea of the topic being a dangerous one, until she had been gently and pleasantly conducted into peril and suffering by her mingled unconsciousness and incredulity—yes, incredulity, for it was remarkable that since her marriage Miriam had grown more than ever impatient of sentiment, and denunciatory of romance.

All this would appear to constitute a state of things which

might have sufficed to tranquilize and content the most jealous and elderly of husbands. Nevertheless, Miriam discovered, with much disgust and contempt, that the ruling passion of her attentive, complimentary husband was jealousy.

There had been a good deal of awkwardness in Florence's position, but she had expected and was prepared for it, and was more afraid of Miriam's impetuosity than of any annoyance to which she was likely to be subjected. It was misery to Mrs. St. Quentin to be obliged to allow her sister-in-law to sit beside Mr. St. Quentin's valet in the rumble of the travelling-carriage as they drove to Southampton on her wedding day; and she eagerly expressed her feelings, so soon as they were alone in the cabin of the steamer. Florence made light of the matter. The valet was a respectable and respectful person, who, when he found she was not disposed to talk, cheerfully kept silence, and punctually attended to her comfort. But Miriam was not to be consoled. It must never occur again, she said, and thenceforth she took precautions which Mr. St. Quentin considered absurd and troublesome, but did not as yet resent.

"Dixon is not an ordinary person, and I am very particular about her," was the only explanation Miriam gave when she made Florence travel in the carriages for "Dames Seules," and ordered her meals to be served separately at the hotels. To interfere with his pretty young wife on a personal point of this kind was not in Mr. St. Quentin's way; but as their terms of residence in various places became longer, and they were more settled, he began to mark his sense of Miriam's over-solicitude for Rose by treating the latter cavalierly, speaking to her in a short, imperious way, which rendered Miriam uncomfortable, and making it evident that he did not recognize any difference between her and the other servants who formed their ostentatiously numerous suite. Florence's was essentially a mild and gentle nature, and she was little given to disliking people; but she did dislike Mr. St. Quentin. *The cold narrow-heartedness of this man, the polished selfish-*

ness of him, the total want of pity for human wants or sufferings—she had noticed early that he was lavish only where his own pleasure was concerned—repelled and disgusted her. She saw him rarely, but on those occasions her manner was unconsciously distant without being respectful ; she did not keep up her assumed character so well as she believed herself to do ; her demeanour to Mr. St. Quentin was not so servant-like as it should have been.

On two or three occasions, he made remarks to Miriam upon the advisability of keeping servants in their proper place, and she took no pains to conceal her displeasure. At last, on a repetition of these strictures, called forth by his finding Miriam and Rose talking and laughing together, to the oblivion of time and of the fact that he was waiting to take Miriam out in the brilliant equipage of which he was so proud, her temper asserted itself for the first time. She told Mr. St. Quentin that she considered his remarks exceedingly intrusive and ungentlemanlike, and that she would do as she pleased. She looked at him in her customary undaunted way as she uttered the defiant words, and she felt slightly uncomfortable at the look she received in return. It was quite outside her previous experience, and plainly expressive of sullen resentment.

“It is better you should understand my meaning at once,” her husband said, touching the horses up sharply as he spoke ; “I don’t recognize your right to find fault with my interference in any matter connected with our common life. I shall interfere when I think proper, and I think proper now. I do not like this woman ; you are too familiar with her ; she is too familiar with you ; she has not the manners or bearing of a well-trained servant. You cannot be ignorant of the impropriety of making a companion of your maid ; or, if you are ignorant of it, I think it is time you should learn it from me.”

Hot anger was in Miriam’s heart, but she kept it down for *Florence’s sake*, and tried to turn the conversation. But this

did not suit Mr. St. Quentin ; he thought he had gained his point, and wished to improve the victorious occasion. He harped upon the subject, until Miriam could no longer forbear, but sharply told him she had heard quite enough of the matter, on which nothing that he could say should alter her mind, and that she begged he would consider it exhausted.

She said nothing to Florence of what had passed ; but her sister-in-law was too sensitive and too acute to fail to notice the oppression of spirits under which Miriam evidently laboured. She pondered over it, quite unsuspectingly, and was filled with forebodings and misgivings. Had Miriam already begun to repent of her bargain ? Was she finding out that she had bought wealth, luxury, pleasure, even freedom itself, far too dear ?

"I remember," said Miriam to Florence that evening, *à propos* of nothing,— "I remember to have read in some book, once on a time, that there is a kind of jealousy which is the result of love, and a kind which is the result of temper. I can fancy the one to be flattering if felt by a person one loved, but the other must be intolerable."

"I should not like the one much better than the other," said Florence gravely, "for it would equally imply distrust, and what greater insult than that can be offered to a woman ?"

"True," said Miriam moodily ; and then she sat silent for a long time, twisting the tassels of her girdle between her fingers, with her eyes fixed upon the ground.

From that day forth Miriam knew that her husband watched her, and that he had a rooted dislike to Florence. A few weeks later, a letter from Walter was sent to their Italian address from The Firs. It was directed to Miriam this time, and contained a letter for Florence. The sisters-in-law were reading their respective letters, in Miriam's dressing-room, when Mr. St. Quentin returned unexpectedly, as Miriam afterwards believed, intentionally, and entered the room. Florence was sitting on a sofa in the deep embrasure of the window, which commanded a *fine* view of the far-famed bay ; and Miriam on

a low footstool beside her. They were both disturbed and agitated, and bright tears were standing in Florence's eyes. She instantly started up, as Mr. St. Quentin came inside the door and stood looking at them with stern displeasure.

"Leave the room, Dixon," he said coldly ; "I wish to speak to Mrs. St. Quentin."

"Return in five minutes, if you please," said Miriam ; "I want to dress then.—Pray, what have you to say to me ?" she continued, in a far different tone, to her husband. "Has anything new or extraordinary happened ?"

"I don't suppose it is either new or extraordinary," he replied, "that you should act against my injunctions. I find you again in unbecoming confidence with a servant. Pray, who are the correspondents whose effusions are the joint property of yourself and your maid ?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. St. Quentin," said Miriam, with an unsuccessful attempt at calmness.

"Oh yes, you do. You were each reading a letter, and talking over it, when I came in—as unexpected as I was unwelcome. I insist on knowing who wrote those letters."

"Do you suppose I scrutinize my maid's correspondence ?"

"Nonsense ! There is something between you which I am determined shall not remain concealed from me."

"You had better ask Dixon who are her correspondents," said Miriam, in a tone of the most insolent contempt. "That would be such a suitable proceeding ; so gentlemanlike !"

"Whom her letter is from, is a secondary consideration ; though I shall learn that too, if I think fit to do so. My present question is to you, and I will trouble you to answer it. From whom is the letter you were reading when I came in ?"

"From my brother."

"I don't believe you."

Miriam turned her back upon him, and struck a handbell *which stood on a table in the window.*

"Be so good as to leave my room," she said ; "I am going to dress."

He took two steps towards her, his face dark with passion. The look was highly unbecoming to him, and would have revealed his age to the least acute observer.

"It is not from your brother ; if it were, it would not be of interest to your maid. I believe you and she are in league to deceive me. And, let me tell you, if it were from your brother I should forbid the correspondence. Your brother is a lying, dissipated blackguard, and he has taken a low girl abroad with him, whom he has either married or pretended to marry."

"You are mad," said Miriam, "or drunk."

"Like your father ! No, I am neither mad nor drunk ; and I know and mean what I say. Show me that letter, I command you !"

Miriam was not far from her husband, but the table was between them. She slipped adroitly to the end of it, and reached the open window ; drew the disputed letter from her bosom, and tore it into shreds. As Florence entered the room, she saw the fragments go fluttering downward through the air, and Miriam's great golden eyes flashing scornful triumph upon her husband.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEFEAT.

MR. ST. QUENTIN left the room without another word. Miriam rushed to the door, slammed and locked it with unmistakable emphasis, and then related the story of this serious matrimonial misunderstanding to Florence, only suppressing Mr. St. Quentin's reference to Walter's suspected marriage. Florence heard Miriam's account of what had happened with dismay. With all Miriam's faults—and they were numerous and increasing, in the fostering false atmosphere of her life—she was “thorough.” Nothing could be more perfect than her fidelity to Walter's trust, her attachment to Walter's wife. These feelings made her self-sacrificing, acute, ready-witted, and reticent. All the passionate temper within her was roused by her husband's conduct, and yet she did not forget that Florence would be rendered more unhappy if she told her all. Whatever was the ground of Mr. Clint's suspicion, and whatever its extent, it had evidently fallen short of the truth in one respect, and outstripped it in another. So long as he continued to believe that the girl he suspected of being Walter's wife had gone with him to America, Florence's position would remain secure. But, equally to the surprise and consternation of Miriam, she found he had imparted his suspicions to Mr. St. Quentin; and the ground on which she had built a superstructure of delusive power, in which she had taken refuge as in a stronghold, crumbled around her.

Where were her promises to her sister-in-law now? Where *was her power* to fulfil them? “If papa should turn you out of *his house*,” she had said, when contemplating what had then *seemed to be the very worst* that could happen, “there will be

mine for you to come to." "Was all this changed?" she asked herself, because the old man she had married, in order to have her own way, had suddenly lifted the mask of smooth amiability, and shown his teeth in a snarl.

There was plenty of fight in Miriam, if fight should prove to be all that was needed; but she was too clear-sighted, in spite of her inexperience, to believe that it would be all. Showing fight is a matter for two people only; but in this case there were three, and Miriam could not suffice to Florence, or, as she instantly felt, Florence to herself. If Mr. St. Quentin chose to insult her, and make the position untenable, what could Miriam do to prevent it, short of revealing that secret which her experience of her husband's character convinced her it would be highly dangerous to reveal?

"We must be more careful: I have been dreadfully incautious, I confess," said Miriam. "I ought to have told you the first time he complained of my familiarity with you, but I was afraid of hurting your feelings."

"You see how hard a false position is to maintain," said Florence with a sigh. "I fear it will soon cease to be possible." My dear, dear sister, we must think of some other resource for me; indeed this will not do. In all our calculations, we never thought it possible that I could be made a subject of dispute between you and Mr. St. Quentin."

"I hope you may prove the only one," said Miriam, impatiently; "but I begin to think there will be a good many strong points of difference between Mr. St. Quentin and me. As to your entertaining any idea of leaving me, it is simply impossible. Our faith is pledged to Walter on that point. We must both be more cautious, and you must keep out of his way as much as possible."

Florence assented, with a heavy heart. "It never was right," she thought, "and it never can be made right, and it never can come right. Oh! if it were but over! If my Walter could but come back to me!"

This first quarrel was made up, of course, but the reconcilia-

tion afforded an illustration of the influence of the disparity of age between Miriam and her husband. There was an awkward slurring over of mutual offence, there was a cold, set courtesy, but no heartiness, no genuine unrestrained feeling of regret and reparation; and ever afterwards there was an indefinable difference in their mutual relation. Mr. St. Quentin admired Miriam as much as ever, was as proud of her beauty and brilliancy, and as tiresomely anxious that both should be recognized to his glorification; but he distrusted her, and he betrayed the fact. Jealousy was making havoc with him. He genuinely disbelieved Miriam's statement about the letter, and the circumstance set his suspicious mind off on a tormenting track of imaginary grievance. What was the tie between her and this insolent servant, who so far outstepped her place? Of course it was Dixon's knowledge of a previous love-affair of Miriam's. They were conspirators, these two, against his happiness and his honour. What did he know of Miriam's girlhood? Miss Monitor's testimony was the testimony of an interested witness—she was responsible for Miriam's good behaviour. Neglect at home and eight years in a London boarding-school comprised the history of his wife, *so far as he knew it*. He felt the full import of this reservation, and his self-tormenting faculty set itself to work. He began to think of his first wife, so short a time dead, and yet, until now, so utterly forgotten. He had known she did not love him; but he had never had any fear, doubt, suspicion concerning her, during their marriage, or before it. She had been quite amenable and obedient, and, if not very happy, had not troubled him about it. He had felt no jealousy in her case—of course he did not call it "jealousy" in his thoughts—she had been entirely dependent upon him, and never endeavoured to elude or decrease that dependence. Mr. St. Quentin was not very far from that fatal stage of affairs at which a man calls himself a fool for having married his wife! Miriam did not love him either, had never pretended to love him; and he was at least not *such a fool as to grumble about that*; but she was not man-

ageable, she was not dependent ; she went her own way, and had her own will, and cared nothing at all for his tastes or opinions. She enjoyed her life thoroughly, and his share of it was as little as she could contrive to reduce it to, not nearly so important as that of her obnoxious maid.

What *was* this correspondence, so unbecomingly shared between the mistress and the servant ? It never occurred to Mr. St. Quentin to believe his wife's statement that the letter he had seen was from her brother. Rose Dixon's part in the matter set that aside at once. How was he to find it out ? If he could have secured the cover of the letter, he would have sent it to Mr. Clint, and asked him whether he knew the handwriting ; but Miriam had destroyed the cover also. The incident remained rankling in his mind, long after the tacit reconciliation between him and Miriam, and he so fed his distorted fancy upon it, that to her most careless words and looks he assigned motives and meanings of which she was both innocent and unconscious.

Even the ingenuity of jealousy and uneasy self-love could not discern in Miriam's conduct any cause for her husband's distrust and suspicion. Her frank and free enjoyment of a society in which she had no intimacies, with which her relations were merely superficial, might have been thoroughly reassuring to any reasonable mind. She was always amused and amusing, ready to enter into any scheme of enjoyment ; she appreciated to the full the luxury of her life, and was usually in high spirits, and radiant with health and beauty. This order of things was hopelessly opposed to a theory of a prior attachment, abandoned from mercenary motives, and renewed, in the form of a dishonourable intrigue, under the shelter of marriage, to the discomfort and misery of a confiding husband. But the mind of Mr. St. Quentin was no more or less reasonable than the mind of any individual abandoned to a mean passion, and this was the absurd fiction he fabricated, when his marriage with Miriam was not yet a year old, and actually wrought *himself up to believing*, as a positive truth. The fact, which

even he could not ignore, that it was impossible for him to fix upon any individual, among the Englishmen whom they had met in foreign cities, as the object of this attachment, the sharer of this intrigue, did not shake Mr. St. Quentin's belief in his bugbear. How could he tell that Miriam had never previously seen any one of the men whom she met at Florence, Naples, Rome, and elsewhere? Aided and abetted by Rose Dixon, and with all the facilities of the perfect freedom he had allowed her, from the first, in his blind faith and credulity, there was no deception which she might not practise safely and successfully. This was a sheer delusion, and there was a strong probability of its growing into a mania, but with the cold craftiness which existed in him, though it had hitherto been but little exercised, Mr. St. Quentin concealed the real spring of his altered mood and changed action, and thus hoped to deceive Miriam. He did deceive her, however, for a short time only.

One of the first results of the condition of mind into which Mr. St. Quentin worked himself, was the curtailment of Miriam's morning leisure. He took to interfering with her disposition of her time, to capricious demands upon it, and to a sort of fidgety espionage which disgusted her. In material respects, Miriam had nothing to complain of. She had the full value of the bargain she had made; his promises were fulfilled, even beyond her expectation, because her girlish imagination had not fully compassed the solid and enviable realities of the position in which her marriage had placed her; but Miriam was "bored to death" by his presence when he was with her, and by the anticipation of it when he was absent.

Partly in consequence of this pervading boredom, and partly because without congenial companionship she could not keep up her interest in "foreign parts," Miriam wished to return to England in the second year of her marriage. She had never exacted from Mr. St. Quentin any specific promise on the subject; but it had been understood that, *the process of acclimatization accomplished by a year on the Continent*, he would "settle" in England. The ques-

tion of place had been left undecided, at Miriam's request ; she had expressed her sentiments concerning the pleasures of rurality to Mr. St. Quentin with entire frankness, and he was not, at that period, inclined to oppose her or them. A house in a good part of London, and the free enjoyment of the pleasures of the metropolis, were now Miriam's great objects ; and it was, therefore, with excessive anger and keen disappointment that she received a peremptory negative from her husband, when she suggested their making a move in the direction of England. He had no intention of returning thither, he said, and he wished to know what was her motive for proposing to do so. Miriam replied that her motive was sufficiently plain ; she was tired of foreign travel, and wished to go to England. Instantly, he began to speculate upon some hidden reason for this most straightforward proceeding. *Some one* was gone, or was going to England, and Miriam wanted to get there too !

His surveillance of Miriam increased in strictness and cunning with this supposed discovery, and she frequently expressed her annoyance to Florence, accompanied with the remark that she had been a fool not to suspect, in time, that the smooth complacency of Mr. St. Quentin was not of a durable kind. But she did not acknowledge to Florence that she had penetrated the motive of his conduct, and found it to be jealousy ; the instinct of the woman, the pride and self-respect inseparable from the wife, withheld her from so humiliating a disclosure. That her husband should dare to insult her by a doubt exasperated Miriam—who was proud, impulsive, and by no means logical—as deeply as though she had married him from such exalted motives as would have entitled her to absolute respect. But Florence did not require an explanation from Miriam, in order to understand the position. The instincts of the woman and the wife were equally strong in her case, and she was in full possession of the whole matter, and also of the dislike and distrust with which Mr. St. Quentin regarded herself.

"I hope she may not find out that she has exchanged one kind of tyranny for another, more intolerable, and from which there is no escape," Florence would think, when Miriam indulged in strictures upon Mr. St. Quentin's "tiresomeness" and "obstinate ways." "May Heaven preserve her from temptation! she is in an awfully dangerous position."

It was an unpleasant shock and surprise to Miriam to find that her power was not absolute—a shock from which she recoiled into perfect silence upon the matter in dispute. If this spirit of opposition were still further roused, and should extend in other directions, all her calculations would be defeated; not only the small ones, with trifling results, to be worked out by her supremacy, but the big sum of all, the calculation on whose correctness she had staked her life, her youth, her happiness. "To marry an old man, and find myself unable to rule him, would be too bad a fate," Miriam would mutter to herself, as if by protesting that a thing would be "too bad" she could do away with its existence; and very stubborn and sullen grew her resolution that she would not be beaten.

Such was the situation of affairs when Miriam received a letter from Mrs. Ritchie, the housekeeper at the Firs.

"Honoured Madam" (so ran the letter), "*I am sorry to have to tell you anything which will cause you trouble, but I consider it is my duty to let you know, if Mr. Martin has not done so, that Mr. Clint has not been well lately.*" ("Drinking, of course," was Miriam's mental comment.) "*He forbade anything to be said about it, but that was some time ago, and since then he has had a bad attack of fever, and is lying, at this present writing, in an exhausted state, his recovery not being satisfactory to my mind; indeed, I am not sure whether it is a recovery at all. He is much wasted; and even before this last attack, he had not left the house for several weeks. I take as much care of him as I can, and Mr. Martin comes regular; but I think, honoured madam, you ought to be informed of his illness, in case it would be a satisfaction to you to return to The Firs, and see to him yourself. I make bold, considering*

all things, to tell you that Mr. Clint has frequently spoken of you lately, and, though he has never said so, not being that kind of gentleman, I am sure he would be very glad if you could come. He reads a little, and seems at times very solitary. I remain, honoured madam, your obedient servant,

“PHŒBE RITCHIE.”

This letter caused Miriam a genuine pang of fear and sorrow. Supposing her father were really seriously ill, and were to die without her seeing him again ; neglected, alone, save for hired service, which, in the case of a man like him, could not be expected to be zealous, heartfelt, or efficient ! Without an instant's doubt or hesitation concerning the proper course of action, and without one thought of the coincidence between the wish she had been urging and the return to England thus suggested, Miriam went in search of Mr. St. Quentin, and communicated to him the contents of Mrs. Ritchie's letter. Miriam spoke on this occasion with more warmth and less formality than there had been for a long time in her manner to her husband. She was moved by a right and generous impulse, and the half-pitying, half-remorseful feelings which actuated her were reflected in her speaking face, in her bright, tearful eyes, and in her rapid and unstudied words. Mr. St. Quentin listened to her with unmoved politeness, sarcastic scrutiny, and entire unbelief.

“I suppose I may prepare to start immediately?” was Miriam's question in conclusion. “I will tell Mrs. Ritchie when to expect us, and write to Mr. Martin to prepare papa.”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” said Mr. St. Quentin. “I have no more intention of returning to England than I had a month ago. This cleverly *apropos* letter does not change my mind in the least.”

“What !” exclaimed Miriam. “Do you mean to say that I am not to go to my father ? ‘Cleverly *apropos* letter !’ Do you dare to insinuate that this letter is not the truth ?”

“I mean to say that I shall not return to England.”

"Then I will go by myself."

"You will do so at your peril. If you go, you never return to any home of mine; and, considering your frankly avowed abhorrence of your father, I hardly believe you will adopt a course which would have *that* result. I don't believe a word of Mrs. Ritchie's letter; I believe this is a concerted plan of yours—you have a taste for confidences with servants, you know—and that that letter has been written to order—a childish expedient to induce me to yield to your wishes, when you saw that you could not have your own way so entirely as you intended."

"Your meanness is beyond my comprehension," said Miriam, looking at him with infinite disdain, her stately head drawn up, and her fine face—whose girlish sweetness was rapidly passing away—pale and set, "and beneath my anger. It provokes only my contempt."

"Indeed! I am unfortunate in incurring so lofty and becoming a rebuke from a lady who has been so suddenly converted into a model of filial affection and solicitude," said Mr. St. Quentin, with a savage sneer; "but I can bear my misfortune. Be quite assured of this, in me you have not a chance of finding the proverbial 'old fool' for whom you evidently take me."

The hand in which Miriam held the letter extended towards him dropped to her side, and a visible shudder of disgust crept over her. She stood for one moment uncertain, as though she were going to speak, then turned abruptly away, and left the room.

"What shall I do, Florence? I am completely puzzled. I know I *ought* to go to papa; I am sure the case is a bad one, and my right place is beside him now. But I cannot be sure that there is any change in his mood; and he might only be savagely angry with me, if I returned to The Firs unasked, and incurred the penalty of a separation from Mr. St. Quentin by doing so. I suppose this man has power to carry out his threat? *But no matter; I have paid too high a price for what he had*

to give me" (there was a strange disturbance and loathing in her face), "to risk the loss of it all now, for the sake of going to my father, who never cared for me, and who would certainly be furious. And yet, that this old man should refuse me; more than that, should dare to insult me with so ineffably mean and low a suspicion! How does such baseness come into people's heads, I wonder? If I give in to him in this, I shall never be able to carry any other point. Florence, what must I do?"

Florence, who had been listening to her with silent tears, raised her gentle eyes to her face, and said, "Miriam, I will go to Mr. Clint."

"You!"

"Yes. Listen to me, my dear sister. You can trust my care of him, and you know I will tell you the truth. If I send for you, come to your father at all hazards—I cheerfully accept *that* responsibility—but otherwise, do not press this disagreement with your husband to extremities. Mr. Clint was never rough with me, and I feel sure I can manage him; and Mrs. Ritchie and I are very good friends, Never fear but that I will do my duty to Walter's father and yours. Mr. St. Quentin has no power to control my movements. I shall be in safety in the place where Walter wished me to be; nothing can possibly happen to me; and indeed, indeed, you will be better without me now. Yes, Miriam, I will go."

"And so I am beaten, and he wins at all points. Florence, I never hated my father, when he made me most wretched; but I do, I do hate this old man!"

"Hush! my dearest; hush!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GOLDEN STATE.

"I WRITE of a land of wonders," says an American author. "I write of California while she is still youthful and full of marvels; while her population is still unsettled; while her business is still fluctuating, her gold abundant, and her birth fresh in the memory of men and women who have scarcely reached their majority. I write of her while she still offers a wide field for the adventurous, the enterprising, and the young, who have life before them, and wish to commence it where they may have the freest career, in full sight of the greatest rewards for success, and with the fewest chances of failure."

It was at this period in the wonderful history of the Golden State that Walter Clint and Lawrence Daly left England to seek their fortune there. They were young and imaginative, adventurous and ambitious, although in different ways; the enterprise had other charms for them than that of its professed and principal object—the acquisition of gold. Lawrence Daly had the stuff in him of which the pioneers of civilization are made. He would have exchanged the city for the desert, with alacrity, any day; and the disappointment, the final solution of the long-drawn spell of uncertainty, which set him free to make the exchange if he chose, was secretly welcome to him. Walter was of a different stamp, and of a feebler nature; but he had caught from his friend some of his enthusiasm, and, in addition to the strong practical motive that had decided *him*, there arose before his fancy a vision of the great new *country*, and the wild free life there, with its absolute novelty,

which had power to charm him even when he most completely appreciated the price he must pay for its realization ;—the long separation from Florence.

To her, indeed, the heaviest portion of this trial was allotted. It is always so to those who remain. An absolutely novel journey, full of adventure and possibilities, with an arduous struggle, and the chances of a splendid success at the end of it, ennobled by a high and independent purpose, was enough to fire a more listless fancy than Walter's. He had not such rich and varied intelligence, so highly cultivated a mind, as Daly's, nor was there so much of daring and endurance in him ; but he was exactly calculated to follow the lead of a superior intellect ; and his sweet temper, complying ways, and general easy-goingness, made him a congenial companion to Lawrence.

Although society had become to a certain extent organized, and the tide of reckless vagabondism, which had poured itself forth over California on the first discovery of gold, had somewhat abated under the steadily repressive influence of the absolute necessity for hard work and the action of a wonderful system of police, the place whither the friends came from the other side of the world to seek their fortunes, was wild and wonderful. "Undefined ruffianism" abounded in it still, and that extraordinary mixture of savage roughness and epicurean luxury, which is one of the strangest features of "mining" life.

When, in after-days, Walter Clint's wife learned the true story of the caravan journey from the coast to the mines, performed by Walter and Lawrence, she wondered that no subtle influence had conveyed to her a sense of its danger, its toil, and its privations. Her husband's letters touched but lightly upon these, while dwelling upon the wonderful and beautiful, the grand and terrible objects which occupied their attention. He wrote of the mighty mountains and the boundless plains ; of the plateaux where deer and buffalo still *abounded*, and whence the Indians had not yet been

banished ; of the deep rich green of the cotton-wood groves ; of the sycamore and the honey-locust, too soon passed ; of the yellow earth, the yellow grass, and the groves of giant sun-flowers. He bade her follow their track, in fancy, over the Great Plains, so full of life, so lonely, and yet never wearisome, with all the grandeur of monotony, and yet continual change ; where the sparkling atmosphere, the never-failing breeze, the solitude which no words can paint, the boundless prairie swell, convey an idea of vastness almost awful, but quite delicious.

Of the places through which their toilsome road lay, Walter wrote much to Florence—of the companions of their journey, little. The rough, wild, wicked men, as some of them were, though many were only harmless, honest, and hard-working ; the bad language, the toil, the danger, the irresistible despondency which sometimes attacked them, sure accompaniment of severe fatigue and over-taxed nerves ; the sense of utter removal from all the habits of their former life, both physical and mental—these things he did not tell her. They would have terrified Florence, for whom indeed the idea of wild nature had a strong charm, but that of undisciplined human passions and lawless human life had unspeakable repulsion.

The journey had no exceptional features. Some years ago, every such journey seemed a marvel, and every detail was eagerly sought. Use has lessened the marvel, and the story has since been told so that none can hope to rival its narrator.

They had entered on their adventurous undertaking with but vague information to guide them, and little definite notion of the best modes of proceeding. But they had found intelligent companions, and gleaned a good deal of knowledge on their toilsome way, and had resolved to try Placer County. They allowed themselves only a short interval of rest on their arrival at San Francisco, after the two long sea-voyages and the crossing of the isthmus. The strange *and exciting aspect* of the great Pacific city, the restless flood of

its feverish life, the amazing variety of character, the extraordinary contrast to every experience of their former lives, had unbounded attraction for the two young men. But they had neither time nor money to spare for the indulgence of their curiosity. The most interesting and romantic portion of their adventurous journey lay before them when they joined a miners' train bound for Placer County.

"The whole county is rugged and mountainous, and much of it is covered with heavy timber;" thus ran Walter's description; "the diggings are likely to last for many years. There is probably no part of the state where the single miner, without capital, has a better chance to dig gold with a profit. This is exactly the place for us, and we have determined to try our luck there. Three men travelling with our caravan are also bound thither. I am getting this letter ready, by bits and scraps, to be despatched from Carson City, when we shall have emerged from the desert. It is a dreadful place, but it has shown me one spectacle which I can never forget. Try to picture to yourself a glittering plain, stretching as far as the eye can reach, in irregular humps, no level ground, no field, no house, no tree, no green, not even earth, only an incrustation of salt and mud, flawed and fissured here and there. This plain is bounded, in the far, dim distance, by lofty mountains of fantastic outline; but to the right and left it has no bounds, and touches the sky like the horizon at sea. We were plodding along beside a waggon in silence, two days ago, oppressed by the solemn, immense solitude, when an Indian, the chief of some 'braves' of a friendly tribe, whom we have met, pointed to a certain spot on the horizon; an action which surprised me, for the Indians seem to me to be totally insensible to the abounding natural phenomena of their wonderful country.

"I looked, and saw before us a stately river, whose banks were skirted with pyramidal trees resembling poplars. Its water was so beautiful and limpid, the green avenues appeared so fresh, that we panted with longing to reach them. Soon the river seemed to expand and overflow on all sides, forming a sea

which bathed the foot of fantastic mountains. Islands with festooned outlines rose from the bosom of this unknown ocean, which was ploughed by vessels of every shape, their white sails swelling to an invisible breeze. Headlands with sinuous, uneven crests, and their sides pierced with mysterious grottoes, stood out from the mountains like the flying buttresses of an old cathedral. In a little bay, in one corner of the picture, enormous whales gambolled on the surface, and spouted up the water in silvery showers. In the foreground of this marine landscape rose elegant habitations in the Italian style, which seemed to be set in the midst of leafy trees. Then it was an army on the march, with its staff gorgeously equipped, its band, its artillery, its squadrons commanded by chiefs decorated with waving plumes. There were also droves of cattle which quietly grazed beside fat sheep and bounding goats. Whirlwinds of dust rose in lofty columns to the sky, and were reflected in the mirror of the waters. Some of the men of our caravan had seen wonderful mirages in America, Africa, and Oceania, but they said that this one far surpassed them all. Nothing was wanting to captivate the eye, and the details were metamorphosed so quickly that the pencil could not reproduce them.

"Every one in our caravan perceived the images in the same way—the Indians as well as ourselves; these images were so clearly defined, that we were at first sight borne away by the charm of the illusion, and were a few minutes before we could recognize that it was a mirage. The phenomenon began at one in the afternoon; the wind was blowing from the south, we were journeying to the east. It was more particularly towards the north that the mirage was the most distinct and the most animated. The sun was shining, and the sky cloudless, but the atmosphere did not appear to possess its usual limpidity. At three o'clock the curtain fell on this fairy scene, and we were brought back to the reality of a horrible salt desert."¹

Lofty hills, their summits crowned with dense woods, peopled with deer, close in a valley which might, for its beauty and its

¹ See M. Jules Rémy on California.

seclusion, be that in which Rasselas learned wisdom and weariness. Far beyond them, rolling stretches of wooded land lie basking in the golden sunshine, which touches with its splendour the mighty crests of the giants of the Sierra. From the encircling hills, many sheer descents, through richly wooded depths, thickly strewn with huge granite rocks, lead to the level plain—of vast extent, cultivated at the sides only, irregular and picturesque, forming a wide-stretching strand for a river, bordered with willow-bushes, which runs through it, and throws off many a little rivulet, to wander through the green and brown expanse. One of these rivulets, its flat banks fringed with poplars and willows, meanders through the plain, and passes by the foot of an enormous mass of auriferous rock, which, worn by the constant action of water, has split into fragments, crumbled, loosened, and set free its veins of gold. A streamlet gushes from its recesses, and swirling amid the roots of overhanging pines, forms a basin at its foot, surrounded with green turf, and then rushes away in a glittering little cascade, over a fall of a few feet, to swell the rivulet. The beauty of the scene could hardly be exceeded, even in the Golden State, which has been declared to be “unsurpassed in the world for climate, scenery, and soil.” It is a busy scene, as well as beautiful. The plain is studded with miners’ huts; and men in every variety of costume, of many nations, and all periods of life beyond childhood and short of actual old age, are pursuing their unvarying, absorbing task—gold-finding in Placer County. All stages of the operation are going on simultaneously over the vast space occupied by the valley. The claim belonging to Lawrence Daly and Walter Clint is one of those known as “river bed,” and their hut is situated on a little strip of stony land, like a slab of stone embedded in shallow earth, which juts out at the foot of the huge mass of rock already mentioned, and overhangs the rivulet, a few hundred yards below the basin and cascade. Behind the hut, which is of adobe, and in nowise different from the others in the valley, the rocks rise abruptly with their scattered covering

of fir and pine, and stretch on for many miles, while the surface of the plain is furrowed and seamed by the relentless search of the gold-seekers.

The door of the hut is closely shut, and there is no sign of any activity or life about it. In its immediate neighbourhood, are all the appliances of the occupation of the inmates. For the moment, stillness and idleness reign, and the only living creature visible is a large dog, who lies across the doorway, in an attitude of quiet vigilance, his pointed muzzle resting on his outstretched forepaws.

About a mile farther down the valley, there is a cluster of huts, forming a kind of little town, with a rough palisade enclosing it; and in the centre, is a long, low, shedlike building as large as six huts put together, from whose roof floats the banner of the Stars and Stripes. A motley crowd of men, horses, waggons, unyoked oxen, bales, casks, and inquisitive dogs, occupies the space around this—the most imposing building in the locality. It is known as “The Store,” it contains everything, and is the general resort of everybody. Between this cluster of huts and the solitary one with the sentinel dog, the rivulet sweeps round, and enormous boulders jut out from the body of the rocky hill, so that the hut is isolated on that side, and shut out from all knowledge of the busy, swarming crowd beyond it. It looks very quiet and peaceful with the evening coming on, full of the indescribable beauty of that hour on the Pacific shores; and something of neatness and order about it indicates that it is not tenanted by low, fierce, or ignorant specimens of the miner population.

As the evening advances, two figures make their appearance, coming round the jutting boulders, and advancing to the cottage. The sentinel dog pricks up his ears, rises, and inspects them. One is familiar to him, the other is not, but the stranger arrives in company with Walter Clint, and Sambo accepts the fact as a certificate of his character and a guarantee of his intentions. The stranger is a young man, very little older than Walter, but taller and stouter. He has red hair, a

red bushy beard, and small sharp grey eyes, with sagacity of the cunning sort in them. He wears a motley costume, in which, through the roughness and carelessness characteristic of the manners of the place in this respect, there shows the former "fastness" of a peculiar type of man, less harmless than the "loafer" proper, and yet not belonging to the avowedly dangerous classes either. He wears a checked shirt, and a flashy tie with a horseshoe-pin, and though his boots are high, and worn over his trousers, they are not miners' boots.

Walter Clint is altered in appearance since that day when he took silent leave of his wife and Miriam at the railway station at London Bridge. He could not personate a candidate for a lady's-maid's place now, with any hope of success. His fair skin is tanned to a healthy brown; his hands are more than ever muscular and hirsute; and his figure has developed into undisguisable manliness, under the influence of constant exercise and hard work. There is no mingling of the past and present in his attire; the red shirt, wide-leaved straw hat, and capacious boots, all mean business, and nothing but business. The two walk briskly on, and Walter enters the hut, preceding his companion,—who looks curiously about him, with a sharp observant glance,—into the room on the right of the doorway. A bare, plain room, but clean, and not quite devoid of comforts, although they are of a makeshift kind, and testify to the ingenuity rather than to the wealth of the inmates. From stout iron hooks in the rafters, which form the ceiling and the roof at once, a hammock is slung. In the hammock lies Lawrence Daly, dozing, not sleeping, in the uneasy semi-consciousness of low fever. He lifts his heavy eyelids, and looks stupidly at Walter, who says to him,—

"I succeeded in finding Dr. Deering, and have brought him with me."

CHAPTER XVI.

SPOILED FIVE.

"HAS he been long ill?" asked the man who had come in with Walter, after he had looked closely at the sick man in the hammock, who seemed unconscious of his presence.

"Only two days. I went to look for you, as soon as he fell ill, but I could not find you. They said you had gone to Placer-Ville."

"They were wrong; I was out prospecting with some new chums. How was he taken?"

"Shivering and sickness, just at sundown; and light-headed during the night. I dared not trust myself, in this climate, though I have done some doctoring in my time in England, and was very uneasy until I made you out this evening."

Walter then proceeded to tell Deering how he had ventured to administer only the simplest remedies, and Deering approved.

"It's fever," he said; "the regular thing, and no mistake; but he'll do; he'll pull through. Has a fine constitution, I should say. Doesn't drink at all?"

"No," said Walter; "eats and drinks very little at any time."

"So much the better. That will stand to him now. He will be much worse than this, though; you must be prepared for that. He has been light-headed, you say?"

"Yes, very; rambling in his talk; trying to get out of his hammock; distressed in his mind. Went on so all night."

"Ah, indeed. You are very tired, yourself, are you not? No rest, I suppose?"

"Not much. There's no one here to help, except Spoiled Five, who is not a bad hand at nurse-tending, only he's terribly afraid of any one who's off his head; about the only thing he is afraid of, I fancy."

"Where is he?" asked Deering, looking round.

"Washing some clothes, down yonder," replied Walter. "Shall you want to send him for anything?"

"I think not. The case is not a complicated or a bad one, though I daresay it seems so to you, who are not accustomed to this kind of fever. I will just have another look at him."

Lawrence Daly was very ill indeed. The swift, sudden fever which belongs to the climate and the occupation, had knocked him down just forty-eight hours previously, after some preliminary menace in the way of thirst and languor. He had borne the fatigue of the journey, and the toil of the new life in the New World, perfectly well hitherto—with unflagging strength and spirits, and Walter saw him succumb to this sudden illness with uncontrollable fear. His affection for Daly had grown with every day of their close association. The hard and rough life they had shared had not produced a hardening or roughening effect upon either of the young men, nor had the many scenes of hardship, violence, and severe struggle which they had witnessed blunted their feelings. It was with keen agony, such as nothing in his previous life had caused him to feel, that Walter had recognized the fever in Lawrence Daly's case; and he permitted Deering to see the relief which his favourable opinion afforded him with perfect openness.

This rather amused Deering. He did not believe in anything with particularly vivid faith, and in friendship he was a confirmed unbeliever. To "Every man for himself," the first half of that cynical proverb, he would have accorded cordial assent; as to "God for us all," he did not believe in a God, and the second half did not concern him. He regarded

Walter as a very "soft party," quite a novel specimen of the digger; and noted, in his quick, observant way, several little precautions for the comfort of the sick man, made with much ingenuity and completeness.

"Are you brothers?" he asked.

"No," replied Walter; "we are friends and comrades. We came out from England together."

"Ah! well—you'll go back together, as far as this fever is concerned. What is your friend's name?"

Walter told him; and they had some desultory talk about the place and its prospects, while Deering prepared some medicine which he had brought, and administered it to Daly.

"Have you been here long?" asked Walter of his companion, who seemed disposed to linger and talk. "I did not hear of you until last week, when Spoiled Five told us of the accident at Snake Gulch."

"That was a bad business. I have been in the country three months—a long time for me. I'm a regular rolling-stone, and, accordingly, have gathered no moss, though I'm always rolling in search of it. I shall roll down New Mexico way next."

"Is it not rather a short trial of a place, only three months?"

"Yes; but it is not so much the place as myself I give the trial to. I came up with the intention of digging, but I couldn't stand it; and you are so confoundedly healthy here, it seems to agree with you all so well, there's not much to be done in doctoring. An odd fever, like our friend's here, or a blasting smash like the Snake Gulch business, is about all that's going; and these things are too accidental in their character to give one solid encouragement."

"Especially if 'one' is a rolling-stone," said Walter, smiling.

"Just so. I'll be going now. Keep him cool and quiet. I shall look in, in the morning."

So saying, Deering went out of the hut, and took his way down the valley, now twinkling all over with lights, towards the

cluster of huts surrounding the store, whence the sounds of anything but select revelry, and fun both fast and furious, were borne towards him. They were welcome to Deering, who was a cautious gambler, and in the habit of picking up not a little of that kind of moss, of which he denied the possession, among the miners, from whose uproarious gatherings he was rarely absent, though he had no fancy for sharing their serious toil. Walter Clint and Lawrence Daly had frequently heard of him during the three months he had passed in that part of the country; stories of his luck at monte and euchre, and of his skill as a doctor, had reached them; but he was, until now, personally unknown to them.

Walter returned to the side of his friend, partner, and patient, who was still slumbering, in the uneasy, fitful sleep of the fever,

"What had I better do?" he muttered. "I cannot leave him. He will be much worse, very bad indeed, this Deering says, and I dare not leave him. And yet, it is not safe to keep the gold. Spoiled Five has warned me twice. The waggons start on Thursday; I must make up my mind by then."

Walter's face was troubled by more than Lawrence Daly's illness, as he sat beside the hammock. Daly rambled less than on the previous night; the medicine had calmed him to some extent, but there was no rational talk between them. Towards morning, Walter himself slept soundly, and was roused only by the dog's vociferous welcome of an arrival at the door of the hut. Walter had thrown himself on a locker, which stood under the window of Daly's room, and contained the greater portion of their worldly goods, and had fallen asleep with his head in an angle of the wall. He sprang up, aching and confused, and with a horrid sense of having neglected the sick man. Had he been asking vainly for water? Had he been suffering, untended? Apparently, neither. His appearance was unchanged; and Walter, after a glance at him, admitted the person who had knocked.

This was a short, thick-set man, very lame, with a shock head

of red hair, and only one eye. The blind side of his face was much disfigured by a rugged scar which traversed the cheek-bone, and by the loss of the eye, which had been destroyed by an accident, and in place of which there was now only an ugly seam, crooked and leaden-hued. The right and sound side had a pleasant expression; and the one bright brown eye had a surprising, contradictory merriment in it, confirmed by the uninjured handsome mouth and strong white teeth. From the fingers of the left hand the ends were missing; they had suffered by the same accident which had crippled him and destroyed his eye; and the circumstance had inspired the wits of the diggings with the happy idea of calling him "Spoiled Five."

He was as well known in the valley as the "innocent" of an Irish mountain village is to all the country round; and, considering that he had come out there from Ireland a strong young man full of health, energy, and industry, and had been reduced, within a month of his arrival, to a state of entire helplessness and hopeless dependence, without the remotest prospect of ever seeing his native land again, "Spoiled Five" was a wonderfully contented individual. In that rude and cosmopolitan place his affection for the old country never declined; among that lawless and godless crowd, his fidelity to the old faith had never faltered. He picked up a livelihood by making himself generally useful, and it was quite wonderful what he could do with his one "good" hand and its maimed fellow. Washing, carpentering, tailoring, in the modified and modest form of mending, cooking, a surprising readiness in repairing everything that went wrong with vehicles of all kinds, a by no means contemptible knowledge of farriery, and a wonderful knack of "minding" the sick—these were some, but only a few of the accomplishments of Spoiled Five. He made a very good living for himself by their employment, and had become quite an institution and a tradition of the place. He was the oldest inhabitant now. Many men of many nations had come there, *and had made their pile*, and gone away, or having failed to make

their pile, had likewise gone away to other parts of the Golden State, or to other occupations. Many had died there of injuries, or disease, or drink, but Spoiled Five remained, contented enough. The old folks at home, for whom he had been bent on making a pile, were gone to their rest, and there were to be no new ties in life for him. He hated yellow-men and "loafers," but otherwise was always on very good terms with the mining population of the fifty or sixty miles of the valley over which his habitual wanderings extended—for he was very migratory—and he had of late attached himself particularly to Walter Clint and Lawrence Daly. Spoiled Five's one eye was a quick one, and had recognized immediately on their arrival that the new chums were gentlemen, and that Daly was an Irishman ; and he was very useful to them in the first days of making acquaintance with their strange location and their wild neighbours. By this time it was generally understood that they had the first claim on the services of Spoiled Five.

"How is he to-day ?" asked the lame man, as he came in with singular noiselessness, and deposited on the locker several miscellaneous articles which he had brought up from the store. Walter gave him a report of the patient, told him Deering's opinion ; and the two proceeded to prepare breakfast, and to attend to Daly's wants. The adobe hut consisted of two good-sized rooms, divided by a passage terminating in a door at either end, and a long low apartment in the rear, which served as kitchen and storeroom. This latter was the scene of Spoiled Five's operations, while the friends talked together.

"Your head is clearer to-day, Lawrence."

"Yes, for a while, but I feel uncertain and giddy. That medicine stupefies me. I must speak to you while I can. Don't stay with me, Walter, I entreat you. Remember the warnings we have had. Take the gold to the station when the waggons go. Spoiled Five will remain with me ; you can trust him, surely, to do all that is necessary ?"

"Don't be uneasy, my dear fellow," said Walter evasively ;

"the gold will be all right. No one knows anything about the nugget, and we are not worth the risk of robbing, for the rogues, are in a great minority, fortunately, and would have no chance of escape. Spoiled Five has been misled by his imagination this time. You will be all right in a week or so, and then I can go."

"It is very unfortunate that I should be knocked up just now," said Daly, turning his hot eyes wearily on his friend, and passing his hand across his forehead, as though he were trying to clear away a mist which hung before him, "when our unexpected success has come. What does Deering say?"

"That you will be all right very soon; that you must be looked after, and must *not* excite yourself."

"Ah, yes," said Daly; and then he turned his head, made another effort to clear away the mist, and remained silent.

Deering had judged Daly's case correctly. When he arrived the next day, he found the patient much worse; the fever was running its regular course. So it went on for many succeeding days, during which the acquaintance between Walter and the "rolling-stone" doctor ripened into a semblance of intimacy. It was, however, only a semblance, being one-sided; for whereas Deering learned many particulars of Clint's previous career, and the history of his life at the gold-mines—for Walter was reticent only on the subject of his marriage, which he never mentioned—Walter learned nothing more about him than the general rumour had already told him, and Deering's free-and-easy description of himself had confirmed.

The story of the enterprise of the two young men had nothing in it to distinguish it from that of hundreds of others who had undertaken similar arduous experiments. It had included danger and discouragement, tremendously hard work, very repulsive associations, many things which had not entered into their calculations, much welcome excitement, great vicissitude, and on *the whole*, up to the present time, a fair measure of success. *They were not, indeed*, making a rapid fortune; they were not

of the number who furnish the romance of Californian history, of the heroes of the "Frisco" gaming-saloons and gold mart. They had been nearly two years at the mines, had been working six months in their present claim, and had begun under tolerably favourable conditions. They were not dissatisfied, but the pile was far from being made yet, though they had sold three lots of gold to the bankers at the nearest station, and were collecting another, intending to take it thither in company with several miners who were going on a similar errand, and were to have started in a few days, when Daly's illness came on.

They had been working, one day, since the early morning, and at some distance apart, each hidden from the other's observation by a high intervening bank of earth, when Walter, resting from his labour at the sluice, heard Daly shouting to him. He ran quickly to the turn of the ravine where his partner was at work, and found him bending over a mass of mud and clay which he was knocking about with a pick.

"What is it?" said Walter, scrambling to Daly's side through the abounding clay and slush.

"It is a nugget!" replied Daly; "and unless I very much mistake, it means home for us, Walter—at least home for you and England for me!"

"Ye're looking mighty cheerful to-night, Misther Clint," said Spoiled Five to his patron, late that evening, when he dropped in upon one of his innumerable errands. He might have lived in their hut altogether; but he never would be persuaded to do so, preferring his own "little bit of a place," a curiously tiny cabin under an abutting crag half-way between the solitary hut and the "town." "Maybe it's letters has come, somehow; though I haven't hard of any."

"No, Five," said Walter, laughing; "there are no letters that I know of. *Do* I look very jolly?"

"Bedad, ye do, sir; ye look as if ye'd found the four-laved shamrock."

"Don't *know* the vegetable in question, Five. What's it

like? What colour is it? Yellow? Anything like what we're looking for all day long here, and find so precious seldom, and so little of it? Eh?"

Walter was going on in his gay, reckless way, when he was checked by a look from Daly, and stopped, rather awkwardly. Spoiled Five, busily engaged in feeding the dog, was not so much occupied as to prevent his seeing this look. He replied as if he had not seen it.

"Misther Daly can tell you. Sure, he's offen hard tell of it at home. More betoken, there's them here that's seen it, and afther that, other things that was plazin' to them, and brought out the luck. Don't ye mind the fella that struck goold down in Mariposa County?"

"No," said Walter. "At least, I don't know whether I've heard of the chum you mean."

"It was long afore you came. He was attacked by a robber an' he got his arm loose an' fired at him. Didn't the first bullet hit a spot of rock just behind the robber's showllder; and didn't he get another offer at him, and do for him wid the second? And then, didn't he look to see what was makin' the rock shine so mighty bright where it was sthruck, and didn't he find quarts of goold in it!"

"Gold-bearing quartz, you mean, Five," suggested Daly.

"Maybe so, Misther Daly; but anyhow, it was a boy from County Westmathe that done it, and he had a four-laved shamrock round his neck, along wid his scap'lar; and if Misther Clint doesn't know what that is, sure *you* do, sir."

"Yes, yes; I know all about it, Five; but I don't think the shamrock is a growth of these parts. Take your glass, Five; it's there on the locker."

Spoiled Five took up the small pewter measure, called by courtesy a glass, and having pulled a lock of his shock hair to the gentleman—for he had not discarded the customary courtesies of his country, even amid such discouraging surroundings,—said, as he slowly turned the liquor round and round, "*Thank ye, sir; and here's your health, and Misther Clint's,*"

(his once bright brown eye was full of fun and meaning). “*Whatsomever yez has found*, here’s wishin’ ye full and plenty of them.” Whereupon he promptly departed, and took his way to his “own little bit of a place.” “Isn’t that quare, now?” he said to himself. “There’s Mither Clint ’ud tell me in a minnit they’d found a nugget o’ goold; and there’s Mither Daly, that comes from my own townland, and he’d hide it from me av he could. Musha, then, them English isn’t so ’cute after all!”

CHAPTER XVII.

WARNING.

PREVIOUSLY to that evening, Walter had received certain hints from Spoiled Five which occasioned him some uneasiness. In his desultory, exceptional sort of life among the busy community, all labouring after a similar fashion for a common end, the maimed man heard and saw much which he was not suspected of knowing. It was fortunate for him that he was unsuspected: he might otherwise have incurred some risk, for it was extremely improbable that the dangerous members of that mixed community would have understood that paradoxical fidelity which was one of his chief characteristics.

Ireland is prolific of "informers;" the executive has, unhappily, never been at a loss for those despicable and corrupt tools with which to do the inevitable dirty work of government; and yet there is no country in the world in which the "informer" is held in such ruthless detestation. No matter what befalls him, however terrible his fate, the popular verdict is "served him right." The wretch who betrays his fellow-men for the government pay is a moral leper, a creature absolutely apart, and debarred from all human pity, one who earns his wages carrying his life in his hand, and when he loses it, is just so much dead carrion. There is nothing in the social system of France more admirable, which makes a deeper impression on the foreign observer, than the parental and filial relations as we see them there: and yet there is no country in the world in which the hideous crime of parricide, held by the *ancients* to be virtually impossible, is so frequent, or perpetrated *under circumstances* so appalling, and from motives so depraved.

How are these two paradoxes to be explained? Of a surety, the French and the Irish nations possess the defects of their qualities.

Spoiled Five had the true Irish horror and hatred of an "informer," carried to its extreme; for, supposing he had been mixed up in any equivocal transaction, not only would he have regarded the betrayal of a comrade as an entirely damnable sin, but he had a deeply rooted aversion to being a party to any kind of detection whatever. He was a perfectly honest, sober individual himself, singularly industrious and tranquil in all his ways, and so little given to conviviality, that he sometimes risked his popularity with his rough though rarely unkind employers, by his lack of disposition to drink and smoke, and his scanty appreciation of howling joviality. But he had a native lawlessness in him; he hated police, and he would lend a hand to the rope which was to hang a spy, any day; while his usual vigilance and keen intelligence would be suffered to slumber strangely, if the matter in hand were the bringing of any other kind of delinquent into "trouble."

Without fully understanding his character in these respects, Walter Clint had an impression that, in conveying to him a warning that he would do well to send the dust lately washed to the nearest station for purchase by the bankers without delay, Spoiled Five had given a strong proof of his attachment. He had not made any explanation, but had merely pressed the matter as an earnest request, muttering something vague about "quare people" being about. Walter had told Daly what Spoiled Five had said, and found him unwilling to attach any importance to it. Everything had been very quiet lately, and they had not had reason for apprehension in consequence of the isolation of their hut. Neither rumour nor their own observation led them to believe that there was any fresh element of disorder, any addition to the average of rowdyism, in the place. They had not a large quantity of "dust" ready, and, but for the finding of the nugget, which was, they *had no doubt, of very considerable value, they would not have*

thought of profiting by the approaching opportunity of transmitting what they had to the station, with the security afforded by numbers. But the finding of the nugget made all the difference, and it was arranged that Walter should join the expedition.

It was with singular approbation that Spoiled Five heard this. Of course it confirmed his impression that some piece of exceptional good fortune had befallen the partners ; and when the correctness of Deering's opinion was made manifest by Daly's increasing illness, the man's vexation was proportionate to his short-lived satisfaction. It was clear that Walter could not leave his friend, who continued for many days unconscious of his presence, and in a state of troubled delirium positively appalling to Spoiled Five, who, if he was not, as Walter had said, afraid of nothing else, was very distinctly afraid of that.

"Holy Virgin !" he would say, with awe, which made the ejaculation half a supplication, "listen to him now ! Isn't it dhrreadful to hear him goin' an like that ; it's he must have the bad mind, I'm afeerd, though his ways is so quiet and aisy." It became so evident to Walter that their faithful assistant was becoming seriously shaken in his good opinion of Lawrence, by his wild ravings and denunciations of imaginary enemies, that he endeavoured to keep him away as much as possible. Deering laughed at the man's ignorance and at Walter's consideration, much to the indignation of Spoiled Five.

"Nothing to do with his thoughts, or with his past life, his goin's on hasn't. Ay, bedad, I'm goin' to believe *that*, amn't I, for him or any docthor ! Maybe there's no Miss Kate, then ; that's on his mind for some rayson best known to himself ? And who's that ould Clibborn he tuk me for last night, I'd like to know ; and let a roar out of him as if he was stuck wid a knife ? Sure, they say when a man's dhrunk he tells the truth, and why wouldn't he tell it when he's mad ! Av *it was* the docthor there himself, I'm thinkin' he wouldn't be *pleasant to listen to*."

After a few days, Daly's illness took a favourable turn, and he began to mend rapidly. Walter had suffered very much from fatigue and anxiety, and was in great need of rest, when, late one night, after he had almost begun to despair of Spoiled Five's return from the store, whither he had gone several hours before to make some purchases, the man came in, and said, seriously, that he had something important to tell him. His manner effectually roused Walter.

"Is Misther Daly asleep?" Spoiled Five asked.

"He is. Why?"

"Because he mus'n't hear what I'm goin' to say. Come out behind the house with me, sir, av ye plaze."

Walter complied.

Spoiled Five planted himself against the low wall, and, taking hold of Walter by the sleeve of his red shirt, said, in a low but decided voice, from which his habitual drawl was almost entirely banished,—

"Misther Clint, you and Misther Daly has known me for a good bit now; did yez ever know me to pry into your affairs, or to make yez an impident answer, or to tell yez a lie?"

"Certainly not, Five; nothing of the kind. You have been our best friend in this strange place, and perfectly trustworthy."

"Thank ye, sir; that's hearty, anyhow. Well, then, ye'll listen to what I tell you, and you'll be said and led by me? Won't you?"

His ugly disfigured face and his maimed figure acquired intense expression from his earnestness.

"Won't you?" he repeated, tightening his grasp on Walter's sleeve, and slightly shaking him.

"I think so, Five. But you must speak out before I promise."

"I'll spake out, at laste in as far as I can; but you'll have to take my word, and not ask me for raysons, or for proofs, for that's just what I can't give you. There's quare people about, and the best men in the Placers is gone to the station, and ye'll *mind* what I tould you afore, Misther Clint?"

Walter nodded assent. He was listening eagerly, watching the man's scarred face intently.

"There's disappointed people here; and when men has come all across the world to do the kind of work that's goin' here, and meets wid disappointment, if they're anyway bad at all, they're not far off desperation. I can't say more about that, and I won't. I don't know what you and Misther Daly found, nor where ye found it; I didn't ask you, and I don't want to know." Walter was going to speak, but Spoiled Five stopped him by a quick movement of his mutilated hand.

"No, sir; don't tell me. I beg and pray of you not to tell me. Whatever you found, and wherever you have it, if it's about the premises, hide it—hide it, sir, somewhere away from the hut, and let no one but yourself know where it's hid. Do it at once, sir; do it as soon as there's light; that will be in an hour; don't let me know anything about it. Let me mind Misther Daly—I'll lie on the floor in the room, and he'll never know it isn't you; or, if he calls you, I'll have some excuse ready—but do it, Misther Clint, do it, if you want to bring what you've got safe home to them that's waitin' for you an' it. And tell me nothin' at all about it; that's all I ask, for my own sake."

"But," said Walter, as Spoiled Five loosed his hold upon his sleeve, and stood waiting his reply, "you will surely tell me what you apprehend, and who are the dangerous parties?"

"No, sir; I won't. I'll tell you nothin' but what I have tould you. But if ye don't mind me, if you don't be said and led by me, you and Misther Daly will only be sorry for it once, and that'll be all your life long."

He glanced up, along the frowning face of the huge rock which rose, a black mass, behind the hut, towards the clear, steel-like sky, already beginning to flush at the approach of the swift-coming morning, then limped into the hut, and *softly* entered the room in which Daly was sleeping the deep, *restful sleep* of convalescence, curled himself up on the floor

beside the locker, and resolutely shut his one eye, in dogged determination, if not in slumber.

Walter remained motionless on the little stony plateau at the back of the hut, where Spoiled Five had left him. He had no longer any inclination to treat the Irishman's warning lightly. No suggestion presented itself to him of the quarter from which danger was to be expected, or the form in which it might come; but he was entirely convinced by Spoiled Five's manner and words, and he resolved to act at once upon his counsel.

The light was spreading over the face of the sky before Walter, now all unconscious of fatigue, left the spot, having matured and considered his plan of action. He stepped down into the rugged road, and from thence rapidly climbed a stony path which led to the brow of a ravine, forming a portion of their claim, distant about a quarter of a mile from the hut. The place was perfectly silent and solitary, the mining tools were lying about, the whole scene was peaceful. He gazed from the top of the ravine at a spot where the rugged earth was scooped deeply out under the ragged edge, and after a few minutes' search, his eye lighted on the spot he was looking for. This was a large piece of rock which stuck out from the earth; and exactly beneath it, at an interval of about six feet, there was another—the two forming natural slabs, by whose rough sides were clumps of stringy, harsh, brownish vegetation. The lower of the two slabs was so placed that a strong active man might reach it by a spring from the winding path, a dry water-course, that led upwards into the ravine, on the side opposite to that from which Walter had approached it. He once more looked cautiously all round, and then rapidly retraced his steps to the hut.

A couple of hours later, when Walter had lain down to rest in his hammock, and Lawrence Daly was thinking of getting up, when the hut and its surroundings wore a most unusual aspect of stillness and idleness, Deering, making an early visit to his patient, found Spoiled Five sitting on a

wooden bench before the door, arrayed in a rough leathern apron, and cleaning all the arms belonging to the establishment.

"I'm doubly glad to find you quite off the sick-list," said Deering, after he and Daly had talked for some time, "because I shall have no hesitation about starting to-morrow."

"To-morrow! Are you going so soon?"

"Yes; going to Sacramento, and thence on the 'roll' I told Clint I meant to try, down New Mexico way."

"And when to England?"

"That the Fates only can tell. I have no particular wish to get back. Have you?"

"Well—yes—I think I have. I don't take very kindly to any other country for long at a time. In that sense, I'm a wanderer too. But we can't go back until we've got what we came for."

They talked of the prospects of the county, and of the State generally, and exchanged some common-places about the chances of their meeting again. Presently, Walter, who on awakening had heard their voices, came in. He was looking pale and tired. He wore a short canvas coat over his digger's shirt, and in one of the gaping dog's-eared pockets there was a small green leathern case, considerably the worse for wear, which served the manifold purposes of purse, portfolio, and house-wife. He shook hands with Deering, and seated himself in his favourite place on the locker, with his head against the wall. Daly told Walter that Deering was leaving the place on the following day, and Deering offered to take charge of any letters they might have ready to be mailed at Sacramento.

This was a welcome offer to Walter; he had written to Florence at intervals during Daly's illness, and also to Miriam, and was glad of an opportunity of securing a comparatively early despatch of his letters. They were ready; he had only *to put that intended for Florence into a cover, enclose it in the letter for Miriam, and direct both to Mrs. St. Quentin, at*

The Firs, Drington, Hampshire. The letters were in the leather case in his pocket, and he got writing materials, which he placed on the locker, and then pulled out the case, produced the letters, and was about to write the addresses, when Deering interrupted him.

"What's the matter with your wrist, Clint?" he asked. "It is bleeding, and you are smearing your letters with blood."

"Bleeding!" exclaimed Walter, holding up his hand, and, in doing so, pushing the letter-case, which he had mechanically closed, off the locker, whence it fell on the floor. "So it is! I cut my wrist with a bit of stone this morning, and, washing my hands just now, set it bleeding again. It's a nasty deep three-cornered cut too." He was twisting a handkerchief round it, when Deering said,—

"Stay; I'll do it up for you!" He took out of his pocket a leather case containing a few small surgical instruments, and a provision of lint and sticking-plaster, and with the aid of these materials fastened up the cut in Walter's wrist, after a fashion which the latter declared to be very comfortable, although it caused him to write the names, "Miriam" and "Florence," upon the several letters intended for his sister and his wife, in a formal and constrained manner. This done, and the letters confided to Deering, Walter cleared away the writing materials.

The three young men talked on for a considerable time. There was no very strong or real liking between them; but they were of the same class, living among men who, for the most part, belonged to inferior classes; and the kind of association which theirs had been, if it had less bearing on the future than the associations of less exceptional phases of society, had greater importance in the present. When at length Deering announced that he must go, and was taking a cordial leave of Daly, combining good wishes with some final professional instructions, Walter declared his intention of accompanying him a bit of the way. He would see him *past the bluff*, he said; and they were leaving the hut together.

when Deering observed his leather instrument-case lying on the floor, in front of the locker. He picked it up, put it into his pocket, and they went out.

At first they talked exclusively of Daly, but after awhile, observing Walter shade his eyes with his hand, though his broad-leaved Panama hat sheltered them already, Deering asked him if he felt ill.

"No," said Walter; "it's only the glare of the sun: it is hotter than usual to-day, I think; and I was up all night, and feel queer."

"Indeed! Was anything wrong with Daly?"

"No," Walter answered, rather confusedly; "I had something particular to do which kept me up, and I was always bad at doing without sleep."

"I should say so," said Deering quietly, "for you are inclined to stagger now; only you are guarding against it at every step. Don't come any farther, I beg; and don't neglect yourself in any way just now. You're overdone."

He stood still as he spoke, and put out his hand. They had reached the bluff by this time, and, with some friendly words, they parted, Deering walking quickly on, and Walter watching his receding figure so long as it was in sight.

"He's a queer, restless fellow, and rather a bad lot, I suspect," thought Walter. "I wonder whether I shall ever see him again!"

"What the devil was he doing," thought Deering, "that kept him up all night, and made him look so confused? I don't think he rightly knew what he was saying. Shouldn't be in the least surprised if he were in for the fever!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BETWEEN DARK AND DAWN.

A DAY or two later, the friends held a consultation over their affairs. Daly was sufficiently recovered to make it safe to do so, and they had a good deal to discuss. Walter took care not to inspire Lawrence with the degree of uneasiness which Spoiled Five's warning had communicated to himself. He told him that he had buried the nugget for its greater security, and found Lawrence rather disposed to laugh at his caution. Their talk turned on England, on the possibilities of the future, and on those absent ones to whom their success would make such a difference. There had been so much of the hard and practical in their life, that they had long left off day-dreaming, and it was a relief to indulge in it again for awhile. It was pleasant to talk of how Walter could go home, and claim his wife, and leave his father to make friends with him, or not, as he chose. He probably would not choose: men of his sort of temper chafe more under the knowledge of the independence of others than from any other cause. Florence had told Walter in her letters that Mr. Clint was civil to her in her assumed character; but that was no reason why he should pardon the assumption of it. He must build no castles on that foundation; but it did not matter very much; he could not care much now. He had come to think of pecuniary independence of his father as the one end to be desired and won. They were talking of the change in their respective looks since they had left England.

"I look rather cut up just now, don't I?" Lawrence asked.

"Indeed you do. Your face is half as long again as it was,

and as thin as a razor. But you will be all right in a few days."

"It doesn't much matter," said Lawrence, with a slight tone of regret in his voice. "There is no one to fret over the spoiling of *my* beauty ; and you will go home with yours improved. You see, that's the great difference between you and me ; you have so much to go home to, and I have so little. Nothing, indeed, except for your sake and your wife's—I never can forget how that brave little woman trusted me—I might just as well stay here, or anywhere, as go there."

"I wish you had known my sister," said Walter, after a pause.

"What put that into your head just now? Do you think we should have fallen in love with one another, and made things comfortable by two stolen matches in the family instead of one?"

"Not exactly ; and yet I don't know. I think you would have liked Miriam. I wonder how she could ever bring herself to do what she has done. It was so unlike her !"

"There I think you are wrong," said Daly ; "if I may say so, knowing your sister only from your description. I fancy she is ambitious and determined, and that she could not endure the sort of life which you yourself, even with a young man's comparative liberty, could not stand. She gave you much that sort of explanation, did she not? I think it is satisfactory."

"I don't. Of course she could not stand the life ; but to get out of it in that way was unworthy of her. I can see, in every line Florence has written to me about it, how she regards it."

"No doubt ; but you must not expect every woman—not even your sister—to be endowed with such delicacy of mind and simple good sense as your wife's. She is, in addition to all this, a romantic person, and believes in love to an extent *not warranted by human experience*. Mrs. St. Quentin

may like her husband well enough, though not so much as your wife would think necessary."

"Perhaps so; but she doesn't write like it, and Florence does not write like it. It is only by experience that any woman can come to understand what she does in marrying for any other motive than love; but instinct ought to have taught a girl like Miriam that it must be a losing game. She never mentioned his name in her last letters to me; they were full of her travels, and her acquaintances, and of everything but her husband and her home."

"Perhaps she is not of a domestic turn. There *are* such women, though Mrs. Clint would not like to believe or admit the fact."

"I can't tell whether she is or not. She never had a home she could love while she and I were together. But she has a fine nature, with all her self-will and worldliness—she certainly is thoroughly worldly—and is generous and true beyond any woman I ever met."

"True to you, you mean—true where she loves; otherwise, there is evidence against her abstract truthfulness of character in her marriage, I think."

"Yes, there is. I did mean true to me. Perhaps she is not a very frank person in general. I daresay she would not be altogether scrupulous about the way of doing anything which she or I wanted to have done. But I cannot blame her for that, having profited by it, as I have done. She has behaved splendidly to Florence. Poor girl! it has been a weary time for her, even with all Miriam's kindness and sympathy. What would it have been without them?"

"Thank heaven, it is nearly over for her and for you too."

"For her and for me!" said Walter, looking up in surprise at Daly. "Why do you say that so distinctly; as if the time had not been long for you too, and is not for you drawing to an end?"

Daly laughed. "You are as sharp as a woman, Walter,

and as suspicious. I may as well tell you I have been thinking of sending you home without me ; only thinking of it as yet. We were talking, just now, of the very different motives of your life and mine. I have not much there, and I have nothing here ; but Deering has been talking to me, and has bitten me, I think, with his rolling-stone fancies. This New World is so large, and I have seen so little of it. There's something irresistible to me in the idea of the vast space, and the immense variety of the human race one may see."

Walter was much distressed to find such a purpose had presented itself to Daly's mind, and endeavoured to persuade him to relinquish it, by every means in his power. Daly told him again that he had not made up his mind, but had merely been set thinking by Deering.

"A bad lot he is," said Walter, "though he did pull you through the fever. A cunning, dangerous fellow, I'm sure, who never did any one any good."

"He does not seem to have done himself any," said Lawrence. "He does not let out much about himself ; but he has been roaming about since he was eighteen—he did tell me that much—and seems no nearer settling down than at first. I daresay he has led a queer life, if one could only know about it."

"Which one can't. And yet what a way of worming things out of other people he has ! I didn't like him a bit, and yet he knows as much about me as I should tell to the person I liked best—he knows all about me, in fact—except that I'm married—and I daresay he has a pretty general notion of your past and present also."

"Yes ; I have nothing to hide—certainly not a sweet, pretty little wife, as you have—and, as he seemed interested about our friendship and partnership, I told him our story—'short and simple annals of the poor'—and how that old ruffian in India had treated me. He said rather a good thing, by-the-by, characteristic of him, I fancy : 'Why the devil didn't you *go out to India*, and make it deuced unpleasant for the old

screw? You'd have brought him to reason that way, and done it much cheaper that coming out here.' It wasn't worth while to explain to him that I did not look at it in that light. He would have made himself unpleasant in some way to old Clibborn, no doubt."

"I am sure he would," assented Walter. "I wonder Deering hasn't got on better; he's the sort of man that ought to get on, if there's any good in pushing and self-assertion."

"I fancy the vagabond strain in him neutralizes those undeniably useful qualities."

Then they talked of the probable value of their nugget; for when the next opportunity for conveying gold to the station under safe escort would be likely to occur; and when they might hope to receive letters from England. It was now a long time since any communication from home had reached them, and Walter was getting very impatient. He did not even know where Florence was. When he had last heard from her, she was at Naples, where Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin meant to remain for the winter and the early spring; and from thence return to England. Her letter was written only a short time before that of Mrs. Ritchie had come to create an entire change in her life, actual and prospective. They referred to its contents, and to Florence's mentioning that Miriam was sitting for her portrait to a painter at Naples.

"She is very handsome, is she not?" asked Daly.

"Yes; I think so. Her features are not very regular, and she has not much colour, people say; but I think her face lovely—the expression is so bright and fearless; and her eyes are splendid—large golden eyes. Can you imagine an eagle's eyes, with all the brightness left in them, and a great deal of exquisite softness added, on occasion?"

"It is not an easy effort of imagination, but I think I can. That is just the kind of beauty I have imagined sometimes, but I never really saw it. But, Walter, a woman like your sister must have married a rich man; she never could have been *happy in an obscure position.*"

"No," said Walter carelessly; "I suppose not. At all events, she has done it, and there's no use in grumbling."

"How glad she will be to welcome you to her home! Where is St. Quentin's place?"

"I don't know that he has one. Neither Miriam nor Florence has said anything about it; and as to her welcoming me, that must depend in a great measure on my venerable brother-in-law. I have rather a curiosity to see the old fellow. I daresay he is not a bad sort, if he were not Miriam's husband."

"There you go again! One would think you were her mother, you are so hard to please. You have just said, very sensibly, that, as the deed was done, there was no use in grumbling; and there you are, grumbling again!"

"I beg your pardon, old fellow," said Walter, with his usual gay good-humour, "for bothering you with my guesses and forebodings about the fate of a woman whom you never saw, and perhaps never will see, though I hope you may. I have been boring you horribly all this time."

"Indeed you have not. Everything that interests you interests me also, and I have the utmost curiosity to see Mrs. St. Quentin. Moreover, I am not at all inclined to doubt that it is much better for my peace of mind that I shall see her first, if I see her at all, *as* Mrs. St. Quentin. How very white and tired you are looking!"

"*I am* tired. I think I will turn in for a good night's rest, and so get rid of my headache."

Nothing was said between the two of the care as tender, and the watching as vigilant, as any which a woman might have bestowed, lavished by Walter on Daly; but between these two words were not needed. Their hearts were knit together in one of those friendships that have the gravity, dignity, and simplicity of the higher class of male character, united with that partial affection which women feel for one another. It had *grown out of a casual association into one of the most enduring ties which human feeling can create, and it was wholly un-*

injured by the great superiority of Lawrence to Walter. Just before they parted for the night, Daly said,—

“I don’t exactly understand where it is you have hidden our nugget, Walter. You must show me the spot to-morrow.”

“I made an exact memorandum of it in my pocket-book, like the man in Edgar Poe’s story; only it’s not in cipher—and also that I don’t mean any one else to read it. Nothing like being businesslike, you know. But as to showing it to you to-morrow, it is out of the question. It’s a good way up the ravine, and a steepish climb to get within sight of it. Don’t flatter yourself you could do the distance, or anything like it, even on the level, as yet. Deering cautioned me about your tendency to imagine yourself too well, and tire yourself.”

The solemn beauty of the night was at its deepest and grandest, and the isolated hut itself was hardly more tranquil than the clustered dwellings lower down in the valley. A great hush had fallen on all the striving and labour of the place; and the murmur of the streamlets, inaudible by day, save at the falls, might be heard under the awful height of the sky. The great rifts in the rocks, the ditches, the dams, all the appliances of the search in which the population of the great valley worked their bodies and strained their minds to the utmost, looked like deserted ruins, gaunt, ugly, and desolate in the midst of nature’s vastness and majesty.

If the solitary hut had had less rude and prosaic surroundings, it might have been accounted picturesque; but as it was, it was only solitary and grim. Walter Clint was not destined to the good night’s sleep that was to cure his headache. A strange restlessness was upon him, against which his resolution to sleep was powerless, and all his efforts to control his mind, and force it into pleasant tracks of thought failed. Why could he not think of home and Florence, of the success which had come to him and Daly, and the possibilities which that success opened up for his future? Why did all these subjects of reflection seem unreal, wavering, dreamlike, and *all sorts of trivialities*—quaint sayings of Spoiled Five, scraps

of miners' gossip, the colour of Deering's neck-tie, little bits out of books he had read long ago, rhymes which he and Miriam had made when they were children, the face and voice of a lecturer whom he had heard at one of the medical schools in London, innumerable trifling occurrences of yesterday, of last year, of ten years ago—why did these things come rushing and tumbling into his aching head in crowds? If they would even have come one by one, so that he might think of each separately, for the instant of time which it would require, and get rid of it! But there was no such relief. These crowding ideas were worthless, silly, teasing; but he could no more separate, disperse, rid himself of them than he could govern the movements of the insects that filled the dazzling air in the golden evenings. They wearied him inexpressibly, but he was powerless under their swarming attacks. The hiding of the nugget—he would think of that! He was determined to think of that. He had done it; he could not exactly, or indeed at all, remember why, but he had done it, and of course he could think of it, could recall every little incident of his task. No; he could not. When he tried to retrace in his fancy the path by which he had ascended the ravine, he found himself a young boy again, running along by the hedge which bordered the road leading from The Firs to Mr. Martin's house at Drington. Here was Mr. Martin feeling his pulse, desiring him to put out his tongue, promising him jam with his physic. Very odd! A little while ago, he was a long way off, with a man whose name he ought to know, but could not remember, in a distant country, where were great mountains and a pitiless desert, broad rivers and herds of strange beasts, rough men and a train of waggons. He had been riding among them only a minute since, and before that he was working at the sluice out there. Out where? How could there be a sluice, and miners' tools, a locker, and a man with red hair and a red beard, in the little garden before the cottage in George Lane, where Mrs. Reeve *was lying dead?* He must get up, and see about this; he

could not permit it. The captain of the ship would not allow such encumbrance ; how came those things on the deck ? He must turn out—it was his watch.

How was this ? He was on land, not in a ship, but striving to burst open a locked and barred door, but whether he was wildly anxious to get in or out of the place which the door defended, he was not sure, he only knew that there was urgent need of him at the other side of those locks and bars. He struggled with all his strength, and, it seemed to him, with the strength of many others besides himself, to wrench them open, for there were whispering voices calling to him, and stealthy steps creeping up to him, and now he must fly. And the locks and bars ! Stay ; he had the secret of them ; they were old acquaintances of his ; he had slid through them many a time when he was a boy. Why, he was a boy now, and he must get out of the house noiselessly, to escape from his father. The bolt is slipped, the key is turned, and Walter stands on the stony plateau, the huge rock frowning blackly upon him, and the awful steel vault of the sky, a million miles, it seems to him, above him. To be sure, it is up there he wants to go ; he knows all about it now ; that was what was whispered close to him ; and he rushes out with a shout, and flings his arms up, as though they were wings, and he were trying them, but is tripped up, and brought down prone upon his hands and face, by something which lies in the deep shadow. He utters no sound, but clutches at this substance, and lies, partly beside, partly over it, shuddering, until, in another minute, Lawrence is on the spot, and investigating that heap by the light of the steel vault and the stars. Besides Walter, it consists of a dead dog and a dead man : of Sambo, dexterously choked by a loop at the end of a long line ; and Spoiled Five, whose skull has been shattered, probably by the butt-end of a pistol.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARKED "IMMEDIATE."

To drag the living man away from the dead, into the hut, as speedily and with as little injury to his insensible body as possible—for Lawrence was too weak to lift Walter, and could only drag him by his arms—to lay him down within the entrance, and replace the fastenings, was Daly's first action; his second, to blow a shrill blast upon a metal whistle—the concerted, well-known signal of danger and distress. He then fetched his revolver, all the chambers charged, laid it on the ground beside him, and once more resumed his efforts to bring Walter to consciousness. The interior of the lonely hut presented a strange spectacle, as Daly, ghastly with horror, and weak with recent illness, strove, all alone with his seemingly dead friend, to loosen the clenched teeth, and unclosethe stiffened hands, ignorant whether desperate enemies were at hand, and without any clue to the crime which had been committed. What had brought Spoiled Five there? Had he come hither with any evil intention, or to watch and protect them? These and innumerable other questions had presented themselves to Lawrence Daly, to remain unanswered, before he had the relief of seeing Walter's eyes unclosethe. At length they did so. It was only for an instant. They closed again, but as he groaned and shuddered, at least life was in the man. Once more Daly sounded his whistle, long and loud, and this time Walter started and writhed at the noise; struggled into a sitting posture on the floor, and stared at Lawrence, without the least recognition *in his burning, glassy eyes*. He groaned heavily again and

again, but made no resistance while Lawrence half led, half dragged him to his hammock. By this time there was a stir in the valley, and men carrying torches were coming along the road towards the hut. There was security in the sound. No attack having been made before the alarm was given and acted upon, none was to be apprehended now. The murderers had evidently decamped. Daly put on some additional clothing, and waited, listening eagerly for the aid that was coming. The voices and the torches drew nearer, the tread of many feet came up along the stony path, past the bluff, and close to the plateau. The dawn was already spreading, and in a few minutes a crowd of eager men surrounded the hut, and were clamorously demanding particulars of the murder, which Daly was quite unable to give them, while a few were minutely examining the body.

They were a rough lot, and horrid sights, in a general way, affected them very little ; but this one roused the indignant compassion and disgust of every man among them. It was such a dastardly crime to kill the maimed man who was so useful, so harmless, so familiar to them all. Every man among them knew Spoiled Five, and his preference for Daly and Clint was also well known. Daly could tell them no more than that the murdered man had had vague apprehensions of danger to them from some quarter which he had not indicated, and had presumably been watching the hut, without their knowledge, on this fatal night. Lawrence accounted for himself on the occasion, thus : he had slept soundly after parting with Walter, until awakened by a noise at first inexplicable to him. Thinking, for a moment, it must have existed only in his fancy, he listened for a repetition of it ; then instantly started up, and rushed out at the back of the hut, where he beheld the spectacle already described.

A minute search of the premises was instituted, but no clue to the perpetrators of the crime was found. While some of the party carried the murdered man into the hut, and laid him on a rough table, one of them bethought him of inspect-

ing the dog, which had been kicked aside, and was lying against the outer wall. The man moved the poor dead brute with his foot, turning him over on his back, and then bent down and minutely examined the loop and line with which he had been choked.

"Whar wer this yer dog when you come out?" he asked Daly, who replied that Sambo was close to Spoiled Five's body: they were in a heap together; he could not tell more exactly than that. The man pushed the dead dog over to the spot from which the dead man had just been removed, and, taking the end of the long line, he walked away with it to the four points in succession, carefully examining the ground in each distance. On the fourth occasion, he lifted up his head with a satisfied air, and, dropping the line, lounged into the hut with his hands in his pockets.

"The dog was chucked up from yonder," said he to Daly. "There's good hiding behind that bit of crag, and somebody's been sittin' agin the bush, for it's squeezed flat. The trick's been done by a chum with a tidy notion of the meanin' of the lasso. I guessed it when I saw the loop, so well greased and taut."

And then, thinking, probably, that he had given enough time and consideration to this matter, about which so many others were busying themselves, the speaker lounged away.

The rude but usually effectual forms of justice, as practised in the State, were all complied with in this case, but without result. If a momentary suspicion lighted on Walter Clint as the possible perpetrator of the deed, it was only momentary. There was no conceivable motive; and Daly's account of the anxiety which the unfortunate man had shown for the safety of their "dust," even in the modified form in which only he was aware of it, combined with the acquaintance with all the good and bad characters in the place that Spoiled Five was well known to have, removed the crime in one sense from the category of mystery. A plot to rob the tenants of the isolated hut had no doubt come to his knowledge. His peculiar ideas

of honour and fidelity at once hindered him from betraying, and prompted him to prevent it at the risk—at the cost, as it proved—of his life. Daly's conjectures were as endless as they were unavailing. Did the murderers know of the existence of the nugget? Had they come for that, as well as for the "dust;" and had Spoiled Five met them, and told them their search would be vain? Had they murdered him, in revenge for his having circumvented them? How much likelihood there was in these suppositions, he could not know until Walter should be in a condition to tell him whether Spoiled Five had admitted to him more knowledge of their success than the ambiguous sentence which he had spoken to them jointly, "*Whatever yez has found, here's wishin' ye full and plenty of them;*" until he could learn from Walter whether the murdered man had any cognizance of Walter's morning's work in the ravine. How soon their success had lost its flavour! With what horror and bitterness it was dashed! Of how little value the gold seemed to him now—when, of the two human beings who only, out of all the swarming multitudes on that vast continent, had loved him, one was a disfigured corpse, and the other was in the deadly gripe of fever. Of how little value? Of none! He loathed it! He was glad to remember that he did not know where it was, that it was put away, out of his keeping, out of his sight, in the earth again, somewhere—and that it could trouble him no more, until these calamities should be overpast.

The murderers kept their secret as securely as the earth held its treasure. They were not detected, though suspicion lighted in several directions, and much increased vigilance was enforced. Even upon that lawless community, it produced a grave impression that the perpetrators of so dastardly a crime should go unknown, and unpunished, in the midst of them; and the victim was daily missed among his familiar haunts. They buried him in a green and peaceful spot in the valley, already peopled with many dead, and then it was discovered *that no man knew his name.* Lawrence and Walter had never

heard it—he had been “Spoiled Five” by traditional usage long before they came to Placer County. A rude wooden cross marks the place of his burial, bearing the familiar name cut deeply into its transverse beam, in perfect good faith, unassociated with the smallest idea of irreverence.

There was no lack of help for Daly in the task he had now to fulfil. There was general and genuine sympathy for the friends, who were getting such a strong turn of trouble, and any number of rough miners would have been available in Walter’s need. For many days Daly had no hope that he could recover. The fever was so unlike that which had attacked himself, so much worse, more violent, more exhausting ; and it had been hard for him, a stronger man than Walter, to fight with it and beat it. Had he even yet beaten it ? he sometimes asked himself, when he felt lassitude and depression invade his powers, alike of mind and body, making him despair of everything. But they told him he must expect to have these sensations for many a day to come. And they told him that Walter would recover, long before he could bring himself to hope for such a possibility, and had told him so many times while yet he refused to believe it.

It was hard to look at Walter, and think that health and vigour could ever come to him again. For some time, indeed, reason seemed to be totally extinguished. He altered so awfully in appearance that Daly dreaded to look at him ; and, when he was not before his eyes, was haunted by the distorted, yellow, hollow, foolish face—the face that was not Walter’s at all, but a dreadful mask fastened on his body by the fever-fiend—a mask which sometimes grinned idly, and sometimes was set in a grim despair, but never, never once, through long days and nights, looked like Walter, or ceased to be foolish and mad ; for its grin of laughter, and its grim lines of grief, were alike motiveless and unmeaning.

Daly’s mind was constantly occupied with Florence. *How was he to write the truth to her when Walter should be gone ?* This was in the first days, when he

was hopeless. The candid, confiding face of the young wife, when she had schooled herself to the great sacrifice of parting with her husband, rose up before his mental vision, and abode there, until he could bear it as ill as the actual sight of Walter. There was in that look such trust in Daly, such innocent obedience, that the remembrance of it was painful. How should he tell her? If Walter died, what would her fate be? Daly could secure her from absolute poverty, and rescue her from her false position in Reginald Clint's house; but where should she find home and friends, if the truth were known, if the foolish project hitherto carried out by the brother and sister were overthrown? He had not been a party to Walter's plan for putting his wife under his sister's protection—he had known nothing of it until it was successfully carried out. And now he felt that Walter's death would change the entire aspect of affairs. Mrs. St. Quentin, with all her affection for her brother, her generous kindness to his wife, and her fidelity to her promise, was not a free agent. He would be the young widow's only efficient friend. She should have the whole of the produce of the joint toil of himself and Walter, and he would begin over again on his own account. For many days his meditations were of this dismal kind, and it was while all the appearances were strongly against Walter's recovery that the party who had gone down to the station with "dust" for the bankers, returned, bringing with them a great bag of letters for the miners.

Daly's usual share in the excitement that such rare occasions produced was great. He had no strong ties to England or Ireland now, and though he had made arrangements—in case of any communication being addressed to him by Mr. Clibborn—for its reaching him in the New World, he regarded such a contingency as so improbable that its existence as a possibility excited no emotion of expectation or suspense within him. But he was anxious and interested for Walter's sake, and on this occasion doubly so. Supposing Walter *should recover*, if not to convalescence, at least to reason,

and wake up to the cares which were now obscured by his illness, it might be of infinite importance to have letters from home to soothe and divert him. So Lawrence heard of the arrival of the letter-bag with anxious hope.

He could not leave Walter, to go to the "town;" but it was not necessary. Many a volunteer would have run down and back, even in working-hours, for letters for the lone hut, and Lawrence knew he should have them quickly, if any there were.

It was evening, and Walter, who had been restless and rambling all day, had become quieter. His wan and sunken face was not, Daly thought, so unlike its former self, as it had been in the morning. The crisis of the fever was near: he had for some hours entertained a hope that Walter's strength might suffice for the passing through it —and was now watching him intently.

He was alone with the sick man, which rarely occurred, as since the miserable death of Spoiled Five, their neighbours had been liberal of visits and services. There was perfect tranquillity immediately around the hut, but from the distance came the innumerable sounds of mining life in its play-hours, and under circumstances of unusual excitement. An occasional murmur of uneasiness, or a moan of pain from the sick man, was the only sound within the hut. The little cottage in George Lane, where he had seen Walter's wife for the first time, came back vividly to Lawrence's remembrance. He thought of her pretty young face, timid, but not weak, of her unaffected composed manner, and of her womanly sympathy when he told her the simple story of his life, hitherto so wasted and disappointed; and a longing came to him, stronger and greater than before, that that young life might have brightness and peace in it. It would be cruel, needless, he thought, that such a harmless creature should be made so miserable. He was full of heartsickening compassion for her unconsciousness of the doom which might be impending over her.

He heard men's steps and voices, and being presently called *by his name*, went out in the front of the hut. Two miners

had come up, bringing some letters and a welcome batch of English newspapers. The letters, three in number, were all for Walter; one was directed in Miriam's hand, two in Florence's. The men left him in a few minutes, and Lawrence went into the hut, examining the postmarks on the letters. The latest was on one of Florence's letters; she had written "Immediate" on the back, with several lines dashed under the word.

"Poor child!" thought Lawrence; "she fancies her plea of urgency would be heard out here! If she only knew that poor Walter cannot read this, now that it has come to him!"

He placed the letters carefully in the locker, and looked over the newspapers while he waited for the arrival of the woman who had undertaken to watch by Walter for that night. But he had not read for many minutes when he threw down the paper, hastily took out the letters, and selecting that one which was marked "Immediate," broke the seal, and read the first lines,—

"MY OWN WALTER,—*Our separation is at an end. This is to tell you that you are to come back at once.*"

CHAPTER XX

MRS. DIXON.

"WELL, here's a letter from Mrs. St. Quentin at last!" said Mrs. Ritchie, the housekeeper at The Firs, to a satellite housemaid, one morning towards the end of spring, when even the neighbourhood of Drington was looking beautiful, and the gloomy old house was touched by the all-pervading sunshine that its perverse construction and position could not enable it altogether to evade.

"She's took her time," remarked the satellite, not deeply interested in the matter; "but master don't care, seemin'ly. He wouldn't break his heart if she didn't come back. I've heard him tell her she knew no more about illness than a dog or a cat, nor, indeed, so much, for they could keep quiet when they was wanted to."

Mrs. Ritchie was not attending to these remarks. She was reading the long-expected letter, and when she came to its conclusion, she turned back to the beginning, and read it through again before she spoke.

"Well, I'm sure!" was her first observation, awakening the curiosity of her companion, who glanced eagerly at the document.

"Well, I'm sure! What next?"

"What first? *I* should like to know, if you don't mind telling me," said the satellite with impatience barely tempered by respect.

"Mrs. St. Quentin ain't coming at all! And I telling her *about Mr. Clint*, as plain as I could!"

"Why ain't she coming? Won't the old gentleman let her?"

Mrs. Ritchie was too much surprised to remember her own dignity, and the impropriety of such a designation for the son-in-law of the house.

"I don't know why she is not coming; she does not tell me. She only says she cannot come; but she is sending Mrs. Dixon to take care of Mr. Clint."

"Lor!"

"Yes, indeed. Well, it's their business, not mine, since I've done my duty by writing to her. Mrs. Dixon will be cleverer than I take her for, if she can manage him, or mind him. It's more than her elders, or betters, *I will* say, can do."

The satellite was still looking at the letter with greedy eyes; and Mrs. Ritchie condescended so far as to read it out for her.

"I am very much obliged to you for writing to me, and distressed at the account which you send me of my father," wrote Miriam. "It is unfortunately out of my power to return to The Firs at present, and yet I am very unwilling that you should have the entire trouble, fatigue, and responsibility of his state of health thrown upon you. I have therefore determined to send Mrs. Dixon, to England, and she will assist you in any nurse-tending which my father may require. You will remember that she is a person to be depended on, very handy in case of illness, and that my father has once or twice availed himself of her services. You will not, of course, let him know that I have sent Mrs. Dixon to The Firs with this purpose in view, as he might not like it. It will be enough that he should know that I request his permission for her to remain at his house, where she will make herself generally useful, until Mr. St. Quentin and I return to England. I think my father will make no objection. I depend on you to arrange all this, and am sure you will find Mrs. Dixon very steady and useful. I have directed her to post this letter in London, so that you will be prepared for her arrival very *shortly after it reaches you*—"

"Lor!" interrupted the satellite; "Mrs. Dixon may come to-day, perhaps. Where's she to sleep?"

Mrs. Ritchie had a reason of her own for not answering this question immediately. She was a shrewd and a kind-hearted woman. The first quality made her aware of the difficulty of obeying certain injunctions contained in a portion of Mrs. St. Quentin's letter which she had not thought proper to read aloud; and the second made her very desirous of complying with them. The other servants had not been jealous of Rose's privileges while Rose's mistress was in the house with her, to keep her almost entirely occupied with herself, and make her more of a companion than a mere maid. But Mrs. Ritchie had too much experience to expect that they would be satisfied that Mrs. Dixon should be treated with extra consideration under the present circumstances. And yet Miriam had written: "You will, I am sure, make Mrs. Dixon as comfortable as possible. She has had a good deal of trouble, I believe, in her life; she likes to keep very much to herself, and she is not very companionable with any of the other servants here. She will be more useful if she is left entirely to herself, and has the charge of my father's rooms. I dare say it will not be any additional trouble to let her have my former rooms, until I can come, and, as you will remember, she always had her meals there."

"She's no loss downstairs, anyhow," was Mrs. Ritchie's reflection, "for she's nothing but a poor, pale kill-joy of a creature, and never wants to lay her needle out of her hand, and have a bit to eat, or a spell of chat, like another. Still, they won't like it. However, that's neither here nor there: it is a great thing for me to get some one to take *him* off my hands—and they must lump it. I'm not going to offend Mrs. St. Quentin for their fancies and feelings."

So, when the satellite repeated her question, Mrs. Ritchie said, with an air of mature consideration, "I think, Susan, the best thing I can do is to give Mrs. Dixon the room *Mrs. St. Quentin* had. She can keep all her needlework and

traps in the sitting-room, and be out of every one's way there, and not far off Mr. Clint, if she really takes to looking after him, and he will let her."

"As you please, m'm, of course," said Susan, sniffing; "but I never did hear of a lady's-maid being given a best bed-room."

"You'll hear of it now, and see it too," said Mrs. Ritchie briskly, for she had no notion of her authority being disputed; "and what's more, I think I shall give Mrs. Dixon her meals in her own room. She has very prim ways with her, and I remember Miss Miriam telling me she had made it a point, when she went to the school to be engaged, that she was not to have her meals with men-servants. She was brought up very strict, it seems."

"Very nonsensical, *I* should say," remarked Susan, with a decided sniff this time. "Poor servants have little enough to amuse them, without making hermits of themselves."

"*That's* true!" assented the housekeeper heartily; "and if she prefers to shut herself up, I'm sure *we* shan't miss her—nor Robert neither. However, we shall see when she comes. Open the shutters, Susan, and dust the rooms out, at all events. I must go and tell Mr. Clint what Mrs. St. Quentin wishes."

"I wonder how he'll take it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure; it depends on his rheumatism."

"And on his temper," muttered Susan, as she slowly ascended the stairs, while Mrs. Ritchie crossed the hall towards the dining-room. "Mrs. Dixon must be a regular soft one, or uncommon fond of Mrs. St. Quentin, to come back here, after she had got away, without her; and to attend on that old brute. I'd see him and his daughter farther first, I know; and Robert will think the same."

Things were thus shaping themselves so as to render the fulfilment of her task less difficult than she could have hoped or expected; while Florence was travelling towards The Firs.

Her courage had not ebbed under the trial of parting with Miriam, or the little disagreeables of her solitary journey. Mrs. St. Quentin had been much distressed by the necessity of Florence's travelling alone; but that latter put that consideration so completely aside, as to make Miriam feel it had done discredit to the common sense of both; and she made her see the needless risk of commenting upon it to Mr. St. Quentin. That gentleman received the intelligence of Rose Dixon's intended departure with unfeigned satisfaction, and plumed himself upon having carried a point quietly but firmly, which it would have been ungentlemanlike to have insisted upon vehemently. He had never been able to discover what it was that Rose Dixon helped his unexpectedly unmanageable wife to "carry on," nor had he been able even to make up his mind as to what it was that he suspected her of "carrying on" with this perfidious aid; but he felt that it would be a great relief to get her out of Miriam's company and his own sight. The demon of jealousy might not torture and tempt him so keenly then. At all events, it would be much easier to watch his wife, when she should have no one familiar with incidents and associations of her past life, to encourage her, and to help to delude him. The replacing of Rose Dixon by an Italian woman, a total stranger to Miriam, should be his task: she must not speak a word of English—Miriam did not speak Italian with sufficient fluency for confidences—and the woman should be in *his* interest. Mr. St. Quentin relaxed his teasing vigilance towards Miriam from the hour in which she coldly announced the news to him, and the sisters-in-law had a good deal of almost unrestrained companionship during the week prior to their parting. Florence had a curiously keen perception of the state of Mr. St. Quentin's mind, and it filled her with apprehensions for Miriam; for she felt that Mr. St. Quentin's morbid jealousy would be only allayed by her departure, but would again resume its active sway over him. The time passed without her

dwelling much upon her own actual circumstances, until she found herself in the train travelling from London Bridge to Drington. A terrible sense of loneliness, dreariness, and apprehension came over her as she stood alone upon the platform where she and her husband had exchanged that dumb farewell, where his hand had so closely grasped, so reluctantly quitted hers—and sight had seemed to be struck from her eyes as her yearning gaze lost him in the crowd.

Florence left her luggage at the Drington Station, and walked up to The Firs. A thousand emotions agitated her, a thousand fears assailed her. Inexpressible sadness was in all her thoughts of Miriam, and of the “way of escape” she had taken, as Florence feared so rashly. How young they both were, her sister-in-law and herself, and how friendless! Many a vision came to Florence of the possibilities of the future, before she turned in at the wide, low, green gate, with its heavy transverse bar;—swung back with a sound oddly familiar after all those months of absence—and began to discern the gloomy house in the dull plateau of unkempt grass. But not one of them prefigured, ever so faintly, that which was really to come to pass.

A great fear fell upon Florence while she stood at the door waiting for admittance, a fear which she summoned up all her strength to dispel. After all—the first deception of her position being irrevocable—she was at least doing the best she could. Walter’s father should be a sacred charge and duty to her; she would endeavour so to serve and tend him, that if discovery should arise, she could plead for herself and for Walter something like a fulfilment of the filial relation on her part, even though done under false pretences. Her natural sweetness and gentleness would be certain to help Florence through the complications of a difficult position, but she was not able to take them into account.

Mrs. Ritchie received Mrs. Dixon with civility, and invited her to tea in her own room, though she explained, to

her great relief, that she was to have Mrs. St. Quentin's former quarters. It did not require much skill to baffle, while seeming to satisfy the curiosity of the household concerning the lately married couple. A vivid account of the glories of foreign lands, of the entertainments at which Mrs. St. Quentin was an admired guest, and the generally "jolly" life she was leading, sufficed. Of course, the old gentleman was very proud of her? Of course. And so he ought to be. Then it was Florence's turn to be inquisitive, and yet to keep a painful restraint upon her anxiety, lest it should pass the bounds of what she might be supposed to feel. Mrs. Ritchie was ready to give her full particulars, and also ready to indulge in speculations of her own, and to cross-question the new arrival respecting the exiled son. Did Mrs. Dixon know what news of Mr. Walter was contained in that letter to Mrs. St. Quentin which had been sent on to foreign parts? Did Mrs. St. Quentin think her brother would return and be reconciled with his father? Mrs. Dixon was in ignorance on these points, beyond the general fact that Mr. Walter was doing well out in the gold country. An awful place, Mrs. Ritchie had heard, where people were murdered as often as not, and nobody ever got hanged for doing it. She really wished Mrs. Dixon had known Mr. Walter, for she never expected him to come back any more—her feelings and her dreams went against it, and she was an uncommon sharp dreamer. It was not to be denied that Mr. Walter had been hardly used; and there wasn't one in Drington, as knew anything about it, who did not think so, as well as she.—He had been rather wild, had he not? Wild! Why, bless Mrs. Dixon's heart, not he—only free, and natural, and high-spirited, as a young man ought to be, and more given to liking the neighbours, and being sociable with them, than to hating everybody, and making himself hateful to them, like his father. Mrs. Ritchie knew no other fault of his. He was a handsome, free-handed young gentleman—not over-wise, but nobody's enemy *except his own*. It was not easy to ascertain exactly what

Mrs. Ritchie meant by the last clause in her description, and Mrs. Dixon seemed anxious to know. Well, he was not very steady, perhaps, and might be easily led, and Mrs. Ritchie thought he would be the better for a friend at his elbow. She hoped he might find good friends for the time he would have to live in those dreadful foreign parts—and once more, being complacently convinced that Mrs. Dixon would never now enjoy the opportunity of becoming acquainted with her mistress's brother, she lamented that she had not been at The Firs "in his time."

Florence did not see anything of Mr. Clint on that evening. He had been better during the past week, and had taken Mrs. Ritchie's communication of Miriam's request with an unusually good grace. He was neither surprised nor concerned at the prolongation of Miriam's absence from England. It was her affair and St. Quentin's, not his; if they liked to throw away money on living uncomfortably among dirty foreigners, he did not blame them for doing so. He did not want them; there was no love lost between them. Indeed, there had been but little of that valuable but unmarketable commodity lost between Mr. Clint and any human being, in the whole course of his life.

On the morning after her arrival at The Firs, Mr. Clint sent for Mrs. Dixon. He wished to speak to her in the study. Florence had gained in good looks and health by her sojourn abroad, and the quiet grace of her figure, and mild, pathetic beauty of her face, were set off by the plainness and propriety of her dress. As she stood just inside the study door, and Mr. Clint looked at her from his place by the writing-table before a distant window, he muttered, almost audibly, "By Jove, she looks like a lady!"

Her mental comment upon him was of a different nature. Mr. Clint was altered since Florence had last seen him, on the day of his daughter's marriage, in a manner and to a degree which she immediately, and rightly, imputed to his *growing propensity* to drink. His handsomely-cut features

were swollen, his eyes were glassy and unsteady, and his figure looked shrunken and stooped. He had been ill; and pain, she knew, makes terrible havoc, but Florence did not hold rheumatism accountable for all she noticed in Reginald Clint's face and form.

He spoke to her civilly, and told her to take a seat; he wished to ask her some questions about Mrs. St. Quentin. She complied; and he asked her about Miriam's health, looks, and enjoyment of foreign travel. He spoke abruptly, but without surliness, and looked at her closely, but not offensively, as she replied.

"That will do," he said, after an interview which had lasted a quarter of an hour; "you may go. I am glad Mrs. St. Quentin sent you here. You are welcome to remain as long as you like. I hope they make you comfortable?"

"Thank you, sir; I am perfectly comfortable."

"What room has Mrs. Ritchie put you in?"

"Mrs. St. Quentin's former room, sir. I have a great deal of needlework to do for my mistress, and Mrs. Ritchie allows me the use of the sitting-room."

"All right;" and Mr. Clint dismissed her with a nod which was, for him, quite friendly.

In Miriam's former sitting-room there stood a piano. It was an old-fashioned but sweet-toned instrument, and Florence had beguiled many hours in playing upon it the music which she and Walter loved. The performer had always been supposed by the servants to be Miriam, and no remarks were made. A few days after Mrs. Dixon's arrival, Mr. Clint summoned Mrs. Ritchie to his presence, and asked her who it was whom he heard playing on the piano overhead. Mrs. Ritchie told him the performer was Dixon.

"Dixon! An accomplished person, to be sure!"

"I shall tell her you don't wish it, sir," began Mrs. Ritchie.

"Tell her nothing of the sort. Who the devil told you I don't wish it? Why shouldn't the girl play the piano if she chooses? Leave her alone."

"Very well, sir ; but you seemed to think a servant—"

"Nonsense ! She may have learned music, or had it in her by nature, and be none the worse servant. There ; you may go."

Mrs. Ritchie was very glad to go. She went straight to Rose Dixon, and told her what had passed. The latter was alarmed at the possible result of her imprudence. The truth was, that, forgetting the incongruity of the exercise of such an accomplishment with the station she had assumed, she had yielded to the strong temptation of solitude and a piano.

"He was very much surprised, as was natural ; but he says you're to play as much as you like—though it do seem like giving you leave to forget your place. It's wonderful that you can get so much good of him, I'm sure."

"I—I was not always brought up to be a servant, Mrs. Ritchie," said Florence timidly ; "at one time I hoped to be a governess, and I learned music, that I might teach it."

"Ay, indeed—that explains a many things. Well, Mrs. Dixon, if you had been in as many places as me, and seen as much of governesses, you would know that you have not lost so much as you may think. A servant's is a much easier life."

"I know that," replied Florence.

Mrs. Ritchie repeated to the satellite the explanation of Mrs. Dixon's out-of-rule conduct. Susan received it with a sniff, and remarked that "eddication needn't have made her so uppish !"

On the following day, when Florence was availing herself of the permission she had received, and the strains of sweet and solemn music were floating on the external air, through the open windows of Miriam's room, Reginald Clint came round the angle of the house-wall, and stood, leaning against a post in the rough railing which kept off the grazing cattle—listening.

CHAPTER XXI.

INFLUENCE.

THE one touch of humanizing taste about Reginald Clint was a love of music. As a young man he had been a not despicable performer on the violin, and had sung well. But the essential unsociability of his disposition, the moroseness which prevented his ever deriving pleasure from the sources at which other people found theirs, was stronger in him than the taste for music, and he gradually relinquished the exercise of his own talent, and the enjoyment of that of others. His wife knew nothing of music. If she had been a fine performer, and had loved the art, he would probably have contrived to torment her through it; as it was, he made her deficiency in that respect a constant grievance. Miriam had been taught the harp and piano, in the regular routine of "extras" at Miss Monitor's; but music was not in her. She played from notes correctly, even expressively, but she could not converse with the taut strings, or the ivory and ebony tablets, winning them by the subtle spell of touch to be the interpreters of the desires of her heart, the yearnings of her fancy, the problems of her mind. Miriam's music was an accomplishment; Florence's music was an inspiration. Reginald Clint had never been touched or interested by the one; he had hardly had patience to listen to Miriam's playing; but by the other he was fairly fascinated. As he stood listening to the sounds, now solemn and mournful, anon gay and triumphant, something long forgotten, or sternly set aside in the rough selfishness and cynical unbelief of his life, seemed to steal into view again, and timidly claim his *attention*.

"That's real music," he muttered; "that's the kind of thing I used to think about, and long for, when—when there were any women about, and they were giving their feeble mimicry of it. It has been born with this girl, and not ill cultivated. Yes, that's real music," he repeated, as Florence dwelt upon one grand chord, and then, releasing note after note, let it pass away in a murmuring ripple of sound. She had finished for the present, and Reginald Clint, with a glance upwards at the open windows, gave himself a shake, and continued his way to the fir-wood.

That evening he sent a quantity of music to Florence, old songs and out-of-fashion compositions of Italian and English composers, which he had loved in his youth. They had lain on the topmost shelf of a bookcase for years, and he had forgotten their existence. Now he had them dusted and conveyed to Mrs. Dixon, with an intimation that he hoped she would study such of them as she liked. Again Mrs. Ritchie wondered. Here was a totally unheard-of piece of politeness and attention on Mr. Clint's part, and to a servant! She was destined to a further surprise on the same subject before very long.

Mr. Martin's tolerably frequent attendance at The Firs had not been slackened of late. He could not do Mr. Clint much good; there was but one thing to be prescribed in his case with any hope of effect—abstinence from intoxicating drinks, and he knew well his patient was incorrigible on that point. But he needed such medical care as Mr. Martin could give, exclusive of the one act of the will which lay solely within his own power, and the doctor never quite lost sight of the interests of the absent son; never entirely ceased to hope for an opportunity of pleading his cause with effect, backed up by some favourable intelligence of his career, to be produced in evidence of his having become steady, industrious, and persevering. Mr. Clint himself had never been any of these things to a remarkable degree, but that fact by no means tempered his expectations of them from Walter, or mollified his displeasure towards him.

Mr. Martin was disappointed by Walter's silence. He had not written to his friend in that part of the world, and he thought that looked bad. He knew that he had not written to his father, but he had not expected him to do so. The doctor was aware of the terms on which Mr. Clint had given his son the money for which he had asked. But Mrs. Ritchie had told "Mr. Walter's" friend of a letter from that dreadful foreign country which had come for Mrs. St. Quentin, and he very much wished to learn the nature of its contents. Arriving at The Firs shortly after Mrs. Dixon's return, he met Mrs. Ritchie in the hall, and she told him that Mrs. St. Quentin's maid had preceded her mistress to England, and was then at The Firs, and that she had heard about Mr. Walter, who was getting on well, and had dug a good deal of gold. With a brief expression of pleasure at the intelligence, Mr. Martin turned into the study, where he usually found his patient. Mr. Clint was there, in his accustomed place, sitting in a deep arm-chair, with his feet upon a second chair, a cigar in his mouth, and a tumbler of brandy-and-water at his elbow.

"That's bad at this hour of the day," said the doctor, whom Mr. Clint had saluted with a curt nod.

"I daresay it is ; you've told me so often enough, but I can't help it. It is the only thing which relieves those infernal pains all over me."

"It has more to do with causing them. How are you to-day ?"

"Much as usual. Won't you sit down ?"

Mr. Martin took a seat, and regarded Mr. Clint with a quiet, meditative gaze.

"How's the cough ?" he asked.

"Bad—constant, especially at night, and fatiguing."

"How have you been sleeping ?"

"Infernally ill—walking about my room for hours sometimes, because I'm too restless to lie in bed, and falling asleep when it's time to get up."

"Just so. — You have heard from Mrs. St. Quentin ?" This

sudden change of topic was as eloquent of Mr. Martin's meaning as he intended it to be ; especially as he pointed it with a significant glance at the brandy-and-water, and a deprecatory shake of the head, familiar and odious to Mr. Clint.

"Yes," replied his patient irritably ; "she has sent her maid to remain here until she comes to England, and the woman says Miriam is all right."

"I am glad to hear it. Is this maid the girl who went away with her ?"

"Yes—Dixon. A very superior sort of person. You remember I told you how useful she was when I was ill in London, and she is quite an acquisition here."

"I remember. I must have a talk with her."

Then the desultory conversation took another direction, and Mr. Martin did not make any allusion to Walter. He did not like Mr. Clint's appearance, which indicated, to his experienced eye, the imminence of another fit of illness. He left him before long, and, as usual, unattended, and found Mrs. Ritchie, also as usual, hovering about the hall.

"He isn't well, I'm afraid, sir ?" she said.

"No, indeed, he is not," replied the doctor.—"Can I see Mrs. St. Quentin's maid ? I should like to have a few words with her."

Mrs. Ritchie replied that she would call Mrs. Dixon down immediately—she was in the upstairs sitting-room ; but Mr. Martin prevented her by going upstairs himself instead.

Florence had been busy with the needle-work which so ably assisted her in her assumed character ; and when Mr. Martin knocked at the door of her sitting-room she was standing beside the central table, which was covered with snips of muslin and ribbon. She looked very pretty, and young, and sorrowful. He introduced himself, and the motive of his visit, with his customary directness, and then startled Florence by asking her abruptly if she could tell him anything about Mr. Walter Clint.

"He has written to Mrs. St. Quentin," she replied, with a *quickly-beating heart*.

"So I heard. Will you tell me what you know of his letters? You need not hesitate, I am an old friend of his, and quite in your mistress's confidence."

A whole tide of recollections swept over Florence's mind—of the history of her husband's boyhood, and the part which the kind doctor had played in it. How hard it was to speak with Walter's best friend, of Walter, in the correct tone of respectful indifference! She told him as much of Walter's enterprise as she thought he would have wished her to tell, and replied to Mr. Martin's remark, that he had surely been sufficiently successful to warrant his writing to his father, that Mrs. St. Quentin had told her that Mr. Walter Clint had made up his mind not to communicate with Mr. Clint for another year, when he hoped to do so in the spirit of the promise he had made.

Mr. Martin was walking softly to and fro before the windows, his head bent downwards, and his hands clasped behind his back. He stopped, and looked up when she said this. "I perceive you are in Mrs. St. Quentin's confidence altogether," he said, "since you know how Mr. Clint and his son parted. I have no doubt that confidence is well placed, and that I am safe in imitating it. Walter Clint calculates in this matter with the cheerful confidence of a young man, and Mrs. St. Quentin has not seen her father for more than a year. I was about to write to her, when Mrs. Ritchie told me that she had, very properly, done so; and that circumstances" (he looked very sharply at Florence here, but she bore the scrutiny calmly—the secret of Miriam's fatal mistake was not to be surprised from her)—"unexplained circumstances have prevented her coming to England. Mrs. Ritchie believed, good woman, that Mr. Clint wished for the society of his daughter. I am convinced that, in this, she is entirely mistaken, and that in sending you, as a substitute, Mrs. St. Quentin has done a very sensible thing. Now, Mrs. Dixon—I am right *in the name*, I think?"

"*You are right, sir.*"

"I am going to speak quite plainly to you about Mr. Clint. I am very glad you are here. He likes you, and I have never known him to like any other human being. The time is coming, not slowly, when all his independence and moroseness, all his violence and suspicion, must give way, under severe bodily suffering; and then, if you have the courage, and the charity, you may amply repay his daughter's confidence and regard by taking care of him. You have had a slight experience of him in illness—are you brave enough to venture on a prolonged experience, and of a very serious nature?"

"I am," said Florence, with tears in her eyes. "Quite ready, for his daughter's sake. But—is he so very ill? He can go about as usual, and keeps his customary hours—at least, so far as I know."

"Just so; but you know very little. Walter Clint must not defer the making of his peace with his father for another year, if he wishes to make it this side the grave. You may tell Mrs. St. Quentin this, and bid her communicate it to her brother. I have endeavoured to get at Mr. Clint's thoughts in reference to his son more than once lately, but I have failed. There is something in the case which I do not understand, and yet I thought I knew it all—I saw enough of it, Heaven knows!—some new cause of bitterness in Mr. Clint's mind, which he is keeping hidden from me, and when I say that, I imply that it is hidden from every one. Walter Clint ought to know this, and to remove it, without any more than the inevitable delay, for the time in which his father will have an opportunity of changing his mind about him, of altering any dispositions he may have made to his detriment—I *know* nothing on this point, recollect, but I have a very strong conviction—will be short."

"Do you mean that Mr. Clint is in danger of death?"

"He is in an early stage of an incurable internal disease," replied Mr. Martin solemnly, "of which, I think, he is not quite unconscious, though he has never put a question to me, and it is very improbable he would listen to me, if I told him."

I hinted some weeks ago, that it might be well to have another medical opinion ; upon which he flew into a rage, and declared, with many oaths, that no doctor but myself should ever darken his doors, and that, if I did not like the trouble of attending him, I might take myself off also. It is rather difficult to resist such an invitation, but I have resisted it for many years, and I shall resist it to the last. Tell Mrs. St. Quentin that, if you please. He may keep up, and about, and the people in the house with him may not perceive any material alteration in him for some time yet, but nothing, except the relinquishment of his habits, would give him a chance for the prolongation of his life. The complete break-down may come soon and suddenly, or it may be deferred some time, for he is a strong man still—but happen it must ; and if you have come to take Mrs. St. Quentin's place you ought to know what that implies, and to be sure you are equal to it."

"I will obey your directions implicitly," said Florence ; "and if I can only induce Mr. Clint to allow me to attend him, I am not afraid of failing in doing so."

"A delicate young creature," thought the doctor, "for such an undertaking, but with something so steady and staid about her, too, that I daresay she will do it admirably. A great turn-up of luck for Clint, that his daughter has sent this young woman in her place ; she will be worth a dozen of Miriam. Why can't she come I wonder? *Won't*, perhaps—or has caught an elderly Tartar."

He continued aloud : "You can write to Mrs. St. Quentin exactly what I tell you. Assure her that all in my power to do shall be done, and especially urge her to represent the condition of his father's health to her brother ; that an attempt may be made to put an end to the unnatural state of things between them."

"Is there anything I can do just now ?"

"No," said Mr. Martin, "there is not. Try to ingratiate yourself with Mr. Clint, to let him get used to you. I suppose you know all his peculiarities ?"

Florence replied that she did, and told Mr. Martin some particulars of Mr. Clint's illness in London.

"Just so," he said; "and next time it will be worse, and the time after worse again, and so on, until there will be no next time. I will say good-bye now, Mrs. Dixon, but I am coming to dinner to-morrow, and by that time I suppose you will have written to Mrs. St. Quentin." He left her, and as he went downstairs, he too thought, like Mr. Clint, "She looks like a lady."

Florence sat down forlornly, and covered her face with her hands. A vision of her old home in her childhood, when she had no notion that such family disunion, misery, concealment, cross-purposes, could possibly exist—a keen, sorrowful remembrance of her dead mother, came to her. "Why were such things?" she thought. "Why was the world so dreary, which was also so fair; and life so troublesome, which had such elements of happiness in it?" And no answer came to her but tears, and the cry in her heart, "Walter! Walter!" What was she to do? That question did not long perplex her. She was to do her duty to Walter's father and to Miriam, to watch for an opportunity of effecting a reconciliation, if possible, having previously endeavoured to procure her husband's permission to tell Mr. Clint the whole truth.

She wrote her letters—one to Walter, one to Miriam—and walked down to the village to post them. On her return, as she was passing the lower range of rooms, to enter the house by a side-door, she observed Mr. Clint in his accustomed place in the study window, and saw that he was looking languid and ill. She had fulfilled her self-appointed task of aiding the housemaid to arrange his rooms in the morning, but had not seen him. Now he perceived her, and opening the long window asked her to step into the room, as he wished to speak to her.

Mr. Clint's study communicated with the formally-furnished, unused drawing-room by a folding-door, which was usually locked, and over which a curtain always hung. Florence saw

that the curtain had been drawn back, and the door was standing open.

"I heard you playing on the piano upstairs," said Mr. Clint. "You play very well indeed ; it is a long time since I have heard such music, indeed since I have heard any worth listening to."

"Thank you, sir," said Florence. "Mrs. Ritchie told me you were so kind as to say you did not mind my using the piano, and that you sent me some music."

"Will you try whether the piano in there is a good instrument, and not too hopelessly out of tune?"

Florence instantly complied. The piano was so placed that the performer was not visible from the study. She touched the keys, running over a brilliant voluntary of chords. The instrument was a good one, and in fair order. Florence told Mr. Clint that she found it so, and he desired her to go on playing. She complied, and he returned to his study. She played on and on, giving herself up to the pleasure of the music she was making, so as to be almost unconscious of the presence of the mute, listening figure in the adjoining room. When she had been playing nearly half an hour, the external door of the drawing-room opening into the hall was cautiously pushed a few inches ajar, and the face of Susan, the housemaid, appeared at it for a moment unseen.

A brief glance sufficed to show her Mrs. Dixon at the piano, the door of communication open, and the curtain drawn back. She could not see Mr. Clint, but she surmised that he was there, and going out by the side-door she peeped through one of the windows of the study from the outside, and satisfied herself of the fact. Then she hastened to relate this portent to Mrs. Ritchie, who received it with provoking indifference. She had taken her cue from Miriam's letter, and her resolution from the instructions of Mr. Martin.

"You mind your own business, Susan, and leave Mrs. Dixon to mind hers," she said to the satellite. "She knows what *she's about*."

"I daresay she does," muttered Susan, indignant at being snubbed on Mrs. Dixon's account; "indeed I have no doubt of it. But I wonder whether Mrs. St. Quentin knows what *she* is about? I don't think she can, or she would remember there's more old fools than one in the world."

From that day forth Florence was summoned to the drawing-room every afternoon to play on the piano for Mr. Clint's delectation. Mr. Martin was made acquainted with this newly-found resource for his patient, who required his services still more frequently as the days went by. They brought some improvement in Mr. Clint's spirits and temper; indeed, all the inmates at The Firs had so much reason to congratulate themselves on the influence which Mrs. Dixon exerted, that small jealousies gave way to the strength of self-interest. But they could all see that the sullen and imperious master of The Firs was ill and suffering; they could all trace in his features, at once bloated and wasted, in the increasing shapelessness of his figure, and the listlessness which was growing upon him, until all his life became a mere desultory loitering, the slow poisoning of his besetting sin. Against that nothing was strong; he could keep his temper under, with Mr. Martin's threat in his ears of the possible result of letting it loose; but he could not keep from drink; that demon had got hold of him securely long ago, and his gripe was not to be loosened.

Florence told Miriam all the truth. The alienated daughter learned it with a sincere and decent sorrow, but without any of the keen agony which it must have caused her had she loved her father. Miriam did not suffer distance and separation to delude her; her former home was not one whit less distasteful to her in memory than it had been in fact; her father's character was in no degree less odious. She had only begun to doubt whether she had exchanged for the better, whether she had not accepted a more wearing slavery. In one respect she could not deceive herself—the present one was incomparably more degrading.

"I cannot come to you," she wrote to Florence in every letter; "*he is unmanageable* on that point, and I have too

much at stake to take the alternative he offers me. Oh, Florence, how I hate him ! I am almost afraid to think how I hate him ! ”

So the time went on, and each day made Florence more useful to her husband's father, and more powerful with him. Mr. Martin told her she was like that boy-shepherd of the tribe of Judah, who charmed the evil spirit out of King Saul.

CHAPTER XXII.

FROM MIRIAM TO FLORENCE.

“Hôtel Bristol, Paris, May, 186—.

“MY DEAREST ROSE,—You will be very much surprised to learn that I am in Paris, but your astonishment cannot surpass mine at finding myself here. I don’t think I could ever get enough of Paris ; so, of course, I am not at all sorry about the move. I will tell you the history of it all, which is simply this. We were getting on very well at Rome—a dear old place, which I liked immensely, if it were only because it is so respectable, so different from the vagabond southern cities—and I had got into a very pleasant English set, with whom we arranged all our plans for Holy Week. I think I must have told you about them. Sir John and Lady Duffie, of Duffie—Lincolnshire people ; Captain and Mrs. Bainbridge ; the Graydons, and others. We made a charming little coterie, and I was brushing up my music considerably, for Claude Auchinleck, Colonel Bainbridge’s nephew, is *fanatico*, and we had musical parties almost every evening. He insisted on practice, too, I can tell you ; and I was very glad of the opportunity. As to the place itself, it is too charming. I was so sorry I had always hated Roman history at Miss Monitor’s, and thought mythology a bore ; for I really felt quite ashamed of my ignorance when I found myself in the place where the heroes had their triumphs, and the gods their votaries. But those dear *Lays* help one wonderfully, keeping one up to who was who, and what was what ; and between them and Hawthorne I got on very well, though I often saw Claude

Auchinleck pulling his moustache to hide a smile, when I made some hazardous guess or other, a couple of centuries wide of the mark or the man. I'm sure I don't know how he came to be well informed, for he is only in the army, but he *is*. Altogether it was very pleasant, and I had quite regained my spirits—though you must not think I had ceased to be sorry for the loss of *you*—and to think there was really a change for the better in Mr. St. Quentin, that he had made up his mind to let me alone, and be rational; and I was beginning to dislike him much less, in consequence—for, you know, I am not ill-natured, and get over things easily, *some* things, at least—when everything came to an end in a sudden explosion.

“It is really so ridiculous, and at the same time so humiliating, that I can hardly tell you what happened. Mr. St. Quentin heard Claude Auchinleck say something one day about knowing the neighbourhood of The Firs very well, and then it turned out that he had been quartered at Winchester, and, having friends in our part of the country, had seen Drington and the Cookes, and visited them and a few other people living quite near The Firs. He was, I suppose, in one of his worst humours—his good ones, as I have found to my cost, are rare and superficial—for he took it into his head that Claude and I were old acquaintances, and that I had hidden the circumstance from him, pretending to have met Claude for the first time at Lady Duffie's, in Rome. My dear, you never witnessed such an absurd scene in your life, only that it was more annoying than funny, and that I lost my presence of mind in the first instance, through sheer amazement, and did not treat him with the contempt he merited; I made up for that afterwards, but not effectually—one cannot try back with perfect success on a sneer; it is weak, if not spontaneous. He made a complete and pitiable idiot of himself—openly declared his belief that I habitually deceived him about my friends and my *correspondence*—harping on the old string, you see, darling—and ended by ordering me to leave Rome instantly. We should go, *he protested*, and without making our destination known to

any one. What did I do? I laughed, having shaken off my first stupor of astonishment. What did I say? That I would not leave Rome until after Holy Week—until, indeed, all the engagements I had at present undertaken were fulfilled—for any command, threat, or entreaty that he could utter. He uttered a good many of the first two, I can tell you; what a fool I was to be taken in by his mild voice and courteous manners!—but my blood was thoroughly up, and he could make nothing of me. I did not condescend, just then, to give him any assurance about Claude Auchinleck; I merely sneered and laughed, and put the thing aside, as being much too contemptible for my notice; and then calmly told him *I would not leave Rome*. Of course he stormed, and said I must, that he would force me to do so. To this I replied that he had better not try, for that I had fully made up my mind, having endured one insult from him, to endure no more, but to return to my father's house the moment he attempted to inflict another on me. And, oh! Rose, how I did wish I had been telling him the truth! How I did wish I had the courage to do it! And how much ashamed of myself I was when I knew in my inmost heart I was telling him a falsehood, and that I should not do anything of the kind.

“‘I will leave the hotel,’ I said, ‘and go to every human being whom we know, intimately or slightly, in Rome, and tell them the story of your conduct. What will be thought of you, do you suppose? How will men regard the man who is avowedly terrified if his wife meets an old acquaintance, and whose mind is so evil that he constructs old acquaintances out of every stranger? Public opinion, it strikes me, will back the woman who will not submit to be accused of lying and dishonesty by a husband to whom she has always behaved well and dutifully.’ This was a complete random shot, but it hit him hard and true. He turned quite white, and when he answered me, which was not for some time, it was in a totally different tone. I was satisfied with the result, though it seemed to me odd that he should understand me so little as to believe

that anything would tempt me to talk to strangers about my matrimonial grievances. But there is a coarse-mindedness about him, which exists, I suppose, in most men of his selfish and conventional stamp ; and as it served my purpose, I did not complain of it on this occasion. I had found out, through it, a weak point in his character, which might prove again, as now, a useful discovery. He is much afraid of public opinion, very desirous of maintaining credit for the amiability, generosity, and high sense of honour, which I really believed him endowed with when I married him. Don't laugh, when you come to these words, Rose, thinking I am making out a case for myself. I don't mean to pretend that I would have refused to marry him, if I had known then, as well as I know now, that he was neither amiable, generous, nor highly honourable—I merely maintain that I did believe him to be so. He is now aware that I have found him out, and I am not sure whether he cares very much ; but I am quite sure he does care very much that other people should not be enlightened also. When I saw the salutary effect produced on him by my threat, I yielded so far as to assure him that he was utterly mistaken, that I had never seen Claude Auchinleck until we met in Rome, and that I should never injure my own sense of self-respect so far as to deceive him in anything of the kind. I am perfectly certain he did not believe me, and that his suspicion remains firm and unchanged to the present moment.

“The scene ended in his giving in, so far as our stay in Rome until nearly the end of April was concerned, and by my consenting to leave Rome then. I did not much care about staying longer ; but I was not prepared for his proposing that we should go to Paris ; I could not resist saying to him, ‘Take care ; you do not know how many old friends I may be casually introduced to in Paris. Had we not better go to Greece or Russia?’ He took no notice of this, I must confess impertinent, speech of mine, and he has been quite civil to me ever since. I use the word civil advisedly. Don't be *too much shocked*, dear, good, and wise little woman that you are, when

I say *I am in hopes* he is leaving off caring about me. It will be such a relief if he really does leave off altogether. I shall be quite content, and he will be far happier, and everything will go on smoothly. If there be a bore which is altogether intolerable in life, it is the love of a man whom one does not love. I never understood rightly what the magnitude of the bore had been until I found that I was ceasing to hate Mr. St. Quentin, when he left off being in love with me; and now, I have no doubt, we shall be quite a model couple. That he has left off, is quite certain; I am no longer told that I am beautiful, until I could almost find it in my heart to wish I could be ugly, for a change; and I am allowed to dispose much more freely of my time. I daresay Bianca, the lumpish, sulky, but not unskilful Italian girl who replaced you, dearest, as my maid, imagined herself, and was supposed by him to be, an efficient spy upon my actions; but, as I had nothing to hide, she might earn her credit and her money to her heart's content, for anything I cared. The whole thing, of which he fondly believed me utterly unconscious, was merely amusing to me. I flatter myself, if I really wanted to carry out any little scheme of my own, as in the case of one you and I know of, it is not an 'active and intelligent official' of Bianca's calibre who should prevent me. So I amuse myself and keep them occupied. I hid a carefully-folded note from my dressmaker in the innermost recesses of my casket the other night, having previously allowed Bianca to see me draw it, with elaborate caution and tenderness, from the folds of my *corsage*, and then I dropped the key of the casket on the carpet before I went out. I hope she brought the note to Mr. St. Q., and that he fully appreciated the value of the prize, and paid for it accordingly. How vexed you will be with me, dearest Rose, and yet I know you will laugh! I must do him the justice to say that all this nonsense has never interfered with his liberality to me. My own allowance is not half the money I have the absolute disposal of, and as I like his money, and do not like his love, it is fortunate that *they are not regulated in proportion.*

"Here we are, in charming rooms, and in the best situation in all Paris. I enjoy it very much indeed, and am rather popular. Mr. St. Quentin is very good-humoured, and does not bother me. If I had you here, I should feel that my visions were being realized at last. That will come soon, I trust. If the accounts from Walter continue good, we shall soon be able to make the truth known. I am delighted, but not surprised, to hear that you are getting on well with every one at The Firs; because it is what I could never do, there is all the more reason for your doing it soon and easily. I wonder were there ever two women in this world so different as you and I? It is very sad to read your account of papa, but I am not much alarmed. It is quite wonderful how men hold out against drink—especially when they have violent tempers, and get their own way in everything. He was always very strong, but not fond of much bodily exertion; and as to the fits of gloom you describe, he has been subject to them as long as I can remember, only he had not any one to play and sing him out of them. He never cared a straw for my efforts in that line; and, indeed, I believe he was right, for I am no musician. We ought to have letters from Walter soon. Now that you and Mr. Martin are such good friends, you might perhaps find an opportunity of pumping him about papa's suspicions of 'Florence Reeve.' I have never forgotten Mr. St. Quentin's saying that Walter had taken some girl with him to America. I wish I might venture to bring up the subject again, but one never knows where a suspicion might arise, and it is better to be patient on the safe side, especially as there is a good chance that our patience may not be taxed much longer. I think you would find Mr. Martin could give you information of how papa came to know or suspect anything, and how much he either knows or suspects. But do not try to find this out, unless you can entirely trust your nerves and your countenance, for Mr. Martin is a 'smart' man. It is not easy to deceive *him*. I know, because I tried it a few times in trifling matters, in *boyish scrapes* of Walter's, and I failed signally. He always

found me out, and told me so, before I had committed myself to unlimited fibs. So be careful, dearest Rose, and don't run risks; for, mind you, I don't believe anything would induce Mr. Martin to connive at your remaining in so false a position, and he would be horribly angry with Walter.

"I hope you are diligently executing all the needlework you took home to do for your exacting and imperious mistress. I wish you could see Bianca's face sometimes, when I practise my clumsy tongue in her dialect, by dwelling on your perfections, and by ridiculing her ideas of dressing my hair. I sometimes entertain her in this way when Mr. St. Q. thinks proper to assist at my toilet; and it is quite funny to see (in the glass) the looks she steals at him. I did this, when I was not certain whether she was in his confidence, and wanted to find out. The experiment succeeded perfectly. Dear creatures! If they only knew how easily I could hide anything I chose from their puny ingenuity, and with what ease and certainty I found *them* out, how vexed they would be! Neither of them has sufficient sense of humour to be amused, as I should be in their place, by such a discovery.

"It must be dreadfully dreary for you at The Firs, my dearest Rose; though I know you will say it is not. Why are you so even-tempered and cheerful-spirited under such circumstances as yours? Don't imagine I am blaming you; I am only wondering at you. Good Heavens! If, in the first place, I *could* love any man as you love Walter, separation from him would drive me wild; and, in the second, a quiet life, *such* a quiet life, under the circumstances, would make me a complete lunatic. Graceless as I am, I can *admire you*, and, and—no! I was going to say what is not true, that I can wish to imitate you. I cannot—I do not feel the desire to be what you are—I am of the earth, earthy—of the world, worldly; and you have a considerable dash of the heavenly in your composition. I do believe I am more worldly since you left me; that I love money, and fine clothes, good living, jewels, horses, all *kinds of show and excitement*, much more than when we were together.

That is certainly a testimony to *you*, if it is a bad sign in your most affectionate sister,

“MIRIAM ST. QUENTIN.”

“P.S.—This ought to have been posted three days ago, but was neglected. Things are not quite so comfortable. I danced three times with a certain Count Scalchi at the De Mouchy’s on Tuesday, and met him at dinner next day, when he made himself agreeable. Mr. St. Quentin is watching *him* now, and I do verily believe *he* believes the man followed me hither from Rome. It is like nothing that ever happened, except the plots of the Spanish romances, and the plays of the Restoration, and, after all, they did not happen! Fortunately, he cannot make me unhappy, but he may make me ridiculous, by making himself so. I wonder is he a little ‘cracked’? He positively looks quite thin and yellow, and ever so much older than he used to look. I should not be surprised if he would not remain in Paris now, if this craze lasts. What dreadful inconstancy he must suspect me of! Not to *him*, *cela va sans dire*, but to Claude Auchinleck, and the mysterious gentleman who preceded him in my light affections, for whose effusions he would persist in mistaking poor Walter’s letters. He never got the better of me on *that* point. By-the-bye, do you remember wanting me to show him one sheet of a letter from Walter, a safe sheet, in which you were not mentioned (it was almost all about his friend, Mr. Daly), in order to convince him that it really did come from Walter, and I would not? I never did, and I never will. If he persists in this present fit of absurdity, and makes any move, I am determined it shall be to England—and I shall carry my point, if I have to do it, by threatening to *run away with Scalchi*, who would be exceedingly unlikely to consent to the arrangement.”

Florence read this letter from Miriam with many contending feelings. The affection for herself which it expressed touched *her deeply*, but the picture it contained of Miriam’s life, and *her feelings*, alarmed her. She could not help being amused

by it, but at the same time she was heartily grieved. She did not believe that Miriam felt Mr. St. Quentin's distrustful and insulting jealousy so little as she pretended to feel it—pretended, not only to Florence, but to herself. She had a proud nature, and would wince under the insult of suspicion, however she might scorn the person who suspected her. And her strong sense and wholly unsentimental turn of mind would render a weakness, even if amiable, intolerable to her. How much more a weakness that was anything but amiable, and exceedingly insulting!

“Her life is much drearier than mine, in reality,” thought Florence, “and has more real danger in it. I do not know from whence the temptation will come, or in what shape, but I am terribly afraid for Miriam.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

FROM FLORENCE TO MIRIAM.

The Firs, May, 186—.

"MY DEAREST MIRIAM,—Your letter has surprised me very much. I suppose I must not venture to tell you what else it has done; but I think you can hardly have expected it to leave my mind as easy as it found it. I cannot help thinking you are persuading, or forcing, yourself into that sort of hard frivolity—I don't know any other name for it—which is in reality not a bit like you. You cannot make me believe that you are really satisfied to think yourself less dear to your husband than you were; if it were only for your pride's sake, I am sure you would not welcome such a conviction. The mere notion of its being the case is indeed absurd: a man so entirely devoted to you, to be changed, rendered indifferent, by a ridiculous notion, quite as humiliating to himself as to you. You will laugh, and say how like me it is to be impressed in the first place by the sentimental aspect of the circumstances related in your letter. The sentimental aspect of a relation which must last all one's life, and is the most important in life, always seems to be worthy of attention; for, after all, a good deal of us *is* sentiment, you know, and cannot be got rid of. I cannot think it, and I am sure it is only a result of the queer notion Mr. St. Quentin has taken into his head. I have always heard and read that jealousy is the most unaccountable of all passions, and I can easily imagine its prompting a man to a kind of reprisals—the 'if you don't care for me, I don't care for you,' kind of thing. But, rely on it, your *power over your husband's feelings* is really unshaken, and if

you would only use it wisely you would both be happy. I do not mean by that a 'model couple' in your sense. I pity him very much, I must say : there is something in my own heart, happily for me, never yet roused, which fills me with compassion for jealous people : they must be so miserable ; and I never could blame Mr. St. Quentin for disliking me. You ought to be able to pity him. He can't help it, I suppose, and perhaps he may consider that a kind of side-winded compliment.

"I cannot tell you the pleasure with which I learned that you are in Paris. It is such a relief to know that you are so near, to know that you *could* come, if it were necessary, at something less than the cost in fatigue and inconvenience of a journey from Rome ; for I must tell you, before I go on to other subjects, that I don't agree with you that there is nothing to be immediately alarmed about in your father's state of health. You can have no idea of the panic I get into sometimes lest he should die without being reconciled to Walter, without seeing him, without learning the truth from his son. There is nothing so dreadful as death, when an unreconciled quarrel remains ; and I am sure Walter, little as he thinks so now, would feel it dreadfully. Besides, he is, though not wholly, yet gravely, in the wrong. I feel that more and more deeply every day, and not all that my utmost efforts can accomplish can ever atone for the deception which Walter has practised on his father. I don't mean in my being here—that is quite a secondary matter ; the original deception of our marriage is what I mean ; and far above my own loneliness without him, my solicitude about him, and longing for his return, is the desire I feel that he and his father should not part for ever estranged. I pray more earnestly for that than I ever prayed for anything in my life. I see a good deal of Mr. Clint now, every day, and I watch closely for any indication that he is thinking of Walter, or is softening towards him. I have not found any, with all my watching ; but perhaps he is on his guard, being suspicious of me. I think he is a man

who would resent its being surmised that he had changed his mind, and, of course, he cannot doubt but that I would tell you anything I could find out.

"Indeed, dear Miriam, he is failing. Mr. Martin is, I am convinced, aware that his state is precarious, although he still persists in going about, and there is no apparent alteration in his ways, or in the ways of the house. What you say about his being a strong man, and resisting his terrible habit for a long time, is true; but I am not sure that the breakdown is not all the more complete and hopeless when it comes. I have had much less difficulty than I could have anticipated in getting into the position I hoped for here. The servants don't like me, of course—it is not to be expected that they should—but then they dislike and fear him so much that they are quite satisfied with any arrangement, however it may savour of favouritism, which removes in some degree the task of waiting upon him off them, and puts it on me. The last time he was confined to the house for three days—of course, after a bout of solitary drinking, which he said was gout—I answered his bell, as if by accident, and told Mrs. Ritchie I thought there was no other servant about; and that I had no objection to do so habitually, when I was in your room, and therefore close to his. The result is I attend on him constantly, and since then he has been better, and I have been requested to resume my piano-playing in the evenings—which puzzles the servants, I can see; but Mrs. Ritchie condescends to approve, and that is all the backing I require. He is more morose than ever. Mr. and Mrs. Cooke have honestly kept the promise they made you, and called on him several times; but he invariably refuses to see them, on the plea that he is not well, and he sees literally no one but Mr. Martin and Mr. Standish.

"I met Mrs. Cooke in the village one day last week, as I was turning away from the post-office after posting a letter to Walter, and she stopped to speak to me. You have always told me she is a very nice woman, and I trust your judgment *and your taste* implicitly; but I must confess I do not like her.

There are times when not all the effort I can make enables me to retain the mental attitude of my position towards others, and I am quite conscious that, in judging Mrs. Cooke, I did not distinctly remember that I was Mrs. St. Quentin's maid, being spoken to by the wife of the rector of the parish, and I made her short and indifferent answers. I did not think her manner pleasant, and the way in which she looked at me was decidedly not so—it was almost suspicious, and, if I might say so, impertinent. She was curious to know whether your father corresponded directly with you, and quite unnecessarily emphatic in expressing her opinion that Mrs. St. Quentin ought to be informed of the extreme seclusion in which her father lived, and how very undesirable his friends considered it. One would have thought, to hear her, that I was keeping your father shut up for some sinister purpose of my own, and that she wanted to make me understand that she had found me out. At all events, she did not impress me agreeably, and I gave her no information, and, I suspect, as little satisfaction.

“My life is very monotonous, but I like it, like it better than any other kind of life, while Walter is absent; and I know I am useful to your father. I think, sometimes, he drinks less, has less time, in fact, in which to drink. He is never violent with me, but sometimes doggedly sullen, so that I know not whether I have offended him, or what is the matter with him. His looks are very much changed. Dear Miriam, I am a bad hand at description, but I must tell you that his hair is thinner and more grey, and it looks lank and damp. His face is red and yet pale; there is a livid hue about it very often, like a thin, ashy shade over the blood-red flesh; and his lips are loose, blue, and seldom quite still. He never walks without his stick now, he leans heavily on it, but with an unsteady hand, the veins and fingers of which are thickened and coarse. His eyes are sometimes bloodshot, and generally dim, except when he is angry about anything, then they can glare still; and *his* voice is uncertain and weaker. When he is

shaking off the effect of a real fit of drinking, he is as hoarse as a raven. He takes some pains to conceal the quantity he drinks. He keeps the key of the wine-cellar as religiously as usual, and puts in the empty bottles out of sight as far as he can. Mr. Martin says he never knew the desire for concealment, which he calls 'a remnant of decency,' to last so long, in the case of a man addicted to this vice, and he instructs me to let him suppose me to be ignorant of the truth as long as possible. I shall be all the more useful to him, Mr. Martin says, when concealment ceases to be practicable, if he can, up to that time, preserve the figment of self-respect; and besides this, there is a kind of restraint in it—it is not much, but it is something.

"He had a dreadful attack last week, but I did not see him in it. No one did, except Mr. Martin and Robert. It did not last long; and Mr. Martin said it would have frightened me uselessly, and probably led, had Mr. Clint discovered my knowledge of it, to his dismissing me from the house. Fancy if Mr. Martin could have surmised the weight and meaning of such a probability to me! He was in abject fear they told me, they could not make out of what, and he clung to them, trembling, with the most heartrending entreaties that they would not leave him, until they succeeded in stupefying him. Then, the waking! the appalling lassitude and misery, and the manifest decrease of strength since the attack. Miriam, I feel convinced he is dying, not by such slow degrees as Mr. Martin prepared me for at all, and that there is nothing to hope for except a briefer period of a less kind of suffering.

"I considered all you said to me maturely, and being quite satisfied that I might safely trust my nerves and my countenance, I endeavoured to find out whether Mr. Martin knew anything of the object of your father's inquiries at Tredegar Terrace.

"I told him my mistress had avowed to me that she feared *something* had occurred still further to embitter the mutual

feelings of her father and her brother, but that, unless Mr. Martin was aware of the circumstance, she had no means of ascertaining whether her conjecture was correct. Mr. Martin replied,—

“‘I suppose I may tell you anything which I would tell Mrs. St. Quentin?’

“‘I am entirely in her confidence in this matter,’ I said.

“‘Well, then,’ continued Mr. Martin, ‘she had better know the truth. Mr. Clint has told me all about it. His son—such a nice fellow, Mrs. Dixon; if he had only a little more sense, and a little less complaisance—fell in love with the daughter of the person in whose house he lodged in London; and after her mother’s death, this young lady went out as governess to some family which she left under peculiar circumstances. I never believe one woman’s account of another, as I told Mr. Clint, when he told me that the woman whose brats the poor girl taught said she was ‘indeed a dangerous inmate;’ which meant, no doubt, that Miss Reeve was an attractive creature, and the lady herself, a Mrs. Clewer, was an elderly catamaran; and I daresay Miss Reeve was all right. The thing came to Mr. Clint’s knowledge in an odd sort of way. A letter addressed in a common hand, like a shopman’s or a servant’s, was sent to The Firs, directed to W. Clint, Esq., and opened by Mr. Clint; it contained a letter, written in the most lover-like terms, to Miss Reeve (Miriam, I did keep my countenance, I assure you I did), signed with Walter’s name, and addressed to Miss Reeve, at Mrs. Clewer’s. There was a second letter, from that no doubt estimable person, in which she informed the poor girl that the letter had been found at the back of a drawer in the room formerly occupied by her, and that she, Mrs. Clewer, in restoring it to her, felt it her duty, as a mother and a decided Christian, to point out to her the error of her ways, and to inform her that it would be out of her power, should she ever apply to her for a recommendation, to give her one. The lady added that she presumed the best way to make sure of the letter reach-

ing its owner, and to make her aware that she was detected, was to send it to the deluded young man whom she had evidently led astray from the paths of duty and wisdom. Accordingly, Mrs. Clewer had forwarded the whole budget to Mr. Walter Clint, at his lodgings at Tredegar Terrace ; and the servant there, who, it seems, knew his father's address, but had lost sight of him for some time, redirected the letter to The Firs. Mr. Clint immediately wrote to Mrs. Clewer for information respecting Miss Reeve, and received in return one of those exquisitely malicious, piously foreboding, effusively vague letters characteristic of women of a certain class of mind, when they are puffed up with the fond notion of being of some importance, and see their way to a safe indulgence in spite. This occurred some time before Miss Clint's marriage ; and Mr. Clint went up to London with his mind full of it, and returned brooding over it, I am convinced, together with all the rest of Walter's misdemeanours, real and imaginary. It is only within the last week he has told me about it.'

" 'And what did you say ?' I contrived to stammer out.

" 'That it was all rubbish ; that Walter had naturally, and no doubt honourably, admired a pretty girl, whom he had met under very provocative circumstances ; and that Mrs. Clewer was an unamiable, spiteful woman, whose ostentatious ignorance of 'what had become of Miss Reeve,' was the exact result of her own conduct to her—depend on it, the woman who wrote that letter after she had left her, treated her ill while she stayed—and that it was a boyish folly, without anything disgraceful in it. He had an absurd notion that Walter might have married this poor girl, but I reasoned him out of that.'

" 'How did you manage that, sir ?' I asked.

" 'Well, indeed, without much difficulty. I had only to represent to him that no one knew what Walter's circumstances were better than he did ; he was perfectly aware that he had *not given* his son the means of keeping a wife, and that, as a *fact*, his son had no wife, but had gone out with a male com-

panion to the gold-diggings. I think no argument could be simpler or more conclusive than *that?*'

"I assented. Dearest Miriam, imagine how I was longing to get away from him! 'You may tell Mrs. St. Quentin all this, as, I suppose, she knows what I said on your arrival; and tell her she need not be uneasy; there is absolutely nothing in it.'

"Imagine my reflections, though I cannot be identified with this calumniated Florence Reeve! Conceive what Walter would feel if he knew of Mrs. Clewer's letter! Do you wonder that I sometimes feel the restraining bands of time and space almost insufferable, as if I must, by a mighty effort of my spirit, burst them and be free—free to join him, to see him! But weary weeks and months must wear themselves away before the seal is taken off my lips.

"You draw a picture of me, dearest Miriam, as much too flattering as your picture of yourself is false to the reality. I did laugh, I confess, at your story about the note from the dressmaker; but would it not be better to face this craze of Mr. St. Quentin's openly, and thus shame him, or reason him out of it? Of course you are very careful to give evil tongues no chance of maligning you. If he is known to be a jealous man, your conduct will be very closely scrutinized. It seems to me that I have grown wonderfully wise of late. Lawrence Daly used to say that nothing would ever teach me the ways of the world; but I am learning them—that letter of Mrs. Clewer's was a whole class-book to me.

"I shall be anxious till I hear from you again. Don't vex Mr. St. Quentin *too much* about Count Scalchi. I wish he would come to England, buy the 'place' he talked about when he first came, and that you would 'settle down.' I know you cannot bear *the word*, but I have a notion, dear Miriam, after all the knocking about you have had, you would find *the thing* very tolerable. I have no home news for you. The place looks neglected and melancholy. Your father, though he goes *out every day* that he is up, in all weathers, hardly ever enters

the garden, and seems to care nothing about it. The path on the border of the fir plantation is his invariable promenade; there he walks, slowly and alone, by the hour together. If he would read it would be a resource for him, but he never reads, not even the newspaper, I think. I must conclude now. Write soon again.

“Your affectionate sister,
“FLORENCE CLINT.”

While Florence was occupied in writing this letter, Mr. Clint was walking, in the listless, depressed, desultory way which had become habitual to him, up and down the path on the edge of the fir-wood. He looked ill, feeble, and angry. Muttered exclamations of impatience escaped him from time to time, and he shook his stout stick with something of the gesture which, a couple of years before, made a stick, in the hand of Reginald Clint when he was in a passion, an unpleasantly suggestive weapon.

“What the devil is keeping the man?” he would mutter. “Not business—he cannot put *me* off on that pretence.”

Presently the individual he was by this time wildly objurgating, appeared. Robert was conducting him towards the fir-wood, when Mr. Clint stood still, and shouted at them,—

“That will do, you fool. Do you suppose he does not know a road when it lies before him, or me when he sees me? Go back, and mind your business.—Soh! you’ve come at last, Standish, have you? I have expected you this hour.”

“I could not come sooner,” replied Mr. Standish—a tall, thin, self-possessed man, who took Mr. Clint’s impatient spleen very quietly—as he joined him. “Do you mean to discuss the important business, on which you tell me you wish to consult me, here?”

“I do,” replied Mr. Clint shortly. “Just give me your arm, will you?”

The other presented his arm, without much alacrity; and *Mr. Clint*, shifting his stick to the left hand, leaned closely

upon it, as he turned into the walk, and pursued it in the direction leading away from the house, talking low and earnestly to his companion. That gentleman did not pay any remarkable attention to his words at first, but after awhile he began to listen with marked even startled interest, and, with bent brows and keenly-searching eyes, to question the speaker closely.

Mr. Standish was a lawyer.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIENDLY OFFICES.

LIFE within the gates at The Firs went on very quietly, to outward appearance, and was so full of anxiety to Florence that her mind, with the one great exception of its straying over the sea to Walter, was concentrated upon it. She knew nothing; she cared nothing about what went on without. But the moroseness and the exclusiveness of Reginald Clint had not banished the influence of gossip among the inmates of his house and their village acquaintances. They had, perhaps, rather intensified the need for the loosing of tongues in every direction in which either information or surmise could be distributed; and the master of The Firs would have been astonished if he could have known how much people who, he would have positively declared, knew nothing at all about him, contrived to say.

That Mr. Clint was a bad father, had been a bad husband, and was not likely ever to be anything but a bad man, were facts so well known and frequently discussed in the neighbourhood that they had quite lost the charm of novelty; but an entirely fresh impetus had been given of late to the gossip of the place, and its motive power was poor unconscious Florence. She went on her way, fulfilling her appointed task, which was becoming day by day more difficult and painful, and she was furnishing an inexhaustible theme of surmise, suspicion, and detraction to a number of people of whose existence she was hardly aware.

The falseness of her position, though, in one of its aspects, never absent from her mind, in others never occurred to

Florence. So intent was she upon the one purpose of her life that she did not perceive the surrounding facts and impressions, and she failed to remark the manifest silence and restraint of the servants towards her, because they were just what she wished for, and by freeing her from a constant necessity for acting, left her all the more time for thought, and the furtherance of her project. She did once or twice notice that Mrs. Ritchie spoke sharply to her, and that she was never asked to join her on any of the occasions which had been impossible to avoid, and which had taxed her gentle patience so severely ; but she merely observed these facts, they made no impression on her.

In the meantime a very pretty little commotion was in progress in the village, and even for some distance outside it, and before very long Mr. Martin became aware of it, and of its origin. The indignant public had convinced itself that Mr. Clint, for whom no esteem or compassion had ever been felt, was in danger of falling "a victim to the arts and fascinations of his daughter's confidential maid," and that Mrs. St. Quentin, owing to her injudicious selection of a young and pretty woman to fill the place she herself ought to have occupied, was not unlikely to find herself accommodated with a step-mother. It was just the sort of thing a man like Mr. Clint, excluded himself from society, would be likely to do ; in short, there were many people who asked, with Susan, whether Mrs. St. Quentin thought there was only one old fool in the world, when she had made sure of her husband ? This question had suggested itself, in the first instance, through the instrumentality of Susan, who, without feeling any positive dislike of Mrs. Dixon, had an uneasy jealousy and suspicion of her, which, of course originated in her unacknowledged intuitive consciousness of that young person's superiority. She had no deliberate intention of slander, or even of ill-nature, in the first whispers which she set abroad, subsequent to her discovery of Mrs. Dixon at the piano in the drawing-room ; but the suggestion that Mrs. St. Quentin's maid was "playing a nice little game

of her own," found such popular favour that Susan could by no means resist multiplying her observations, and detailing their results with considerable exaggeration.

The perfect quiet of life at The Firs, and the seclusion of it, were dangerous in the sense that they threw Florence off her guard, that she appeared as she was, a refined and high-minded young lady, and by degrees ceased to remember the technicalities to which she had trained herself for the maintenance of her assumed position. This told seriously in support of the theory of her designs upon Mr. Clint; for whereas she was unconsciously resuming the externals of her real station, she was supposed to be practising for the station to which she nefariously aspired.

It would be difficult, in any case, to trace the progress of a rumour originating in one class of society, to the knowledge of another, and its adoption by that other. In this particular instance it would be impossible. Mrs. Cooke tried to trace it, but she failed; it had passed through so many channels before it reached her through the medium of the village school-mistress, a few days before that on which she had met Florence in the village, and produced so unpleasing an effect on her. Circumstances were against Florence, it must be confessed, since the way of the world is to take a bad motive for granted, but never to recognize a generous one, except under the pressure of overwhelming proof; and Mrs. Cooke, a sensible woman, and not in the least ill-natured, felt some concern for her friend Miriam. There was another point to view, to be sure—whether any woman, with a good character and a decent education, would not be so much too good for Mr. Clint as to be fairly held to have purchased the worldly advantages involved in becoming his wife at a very high price indeed; but Mrs. Cooke could hardly be expected to consider the matter in that aspect. Class prejudices have such tremendous power over women that it would be almost impossible, to the most reasonable among them, to discern that marrying a "gentleman" might be not *only a condescension and a sacrifice*, but an actual degradation, *on the part of a "servant."*

As it was, Mrs. Cooke felt much indignation with Mrs. Dixon, contempt for Mr. Clint, compassion for Miriam, and indecision as regarded herself. She had forgotten her husband's intuitive credulity about Miriam's intention of accepting Mr. St. Quentin, or she might have been prepared for his reception of the exciting item of village gossip which she now retailed to him. He merely remarked that it would be a great pity any decent woman should become the wife of such a man, but that he supposed the poor girl wished, like her mistress, to "better herself."

"Like Miriam!" exclaimed Mrs. Cooke, aghast at the comparison. "What *can* you mean?"

"How *can* you ask? Miriam Clint married an old man to *better herself*—it is the word that shocks you, my dear, not the fact; and this young woman may, perhaps, if this story you have heard of her anomalous position at The Firs be the truth, be scheming, without assistance, to do what Miriam was backed up in doing by every one."

"But, my dear John, think of the difference—think of her position!"

"But, my dear Fanny, think of his age, his character, and his habits!"

"It is impossible you could approve!" said Mrs. Cooke, rather bewildered.

"I certainly do not approve; but, supposing this gossiping story to have any foundation, which I do not believe, you should bear in mind that vulgar but veracious proverb, that 'what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.'"

The immediate result of this conversation was a letter from Mrs. Cooke to Miriam, which sufficiently accounted for the impression produced on Florence by her interview with that lady. She had indeed been regarded with suspicion, and purposely reminded of her station. "It is the most exquisitely funny complication," wrote Miriam to poor Florence, "that ever occurred. I am so possessed with the comicality of the idea that I can hardly take a serious view of the inconvenience

it might have led to, if we had found it out sooner, when the time which will set it all to rights was farther away. I laughed until I nearly cried over the letter; and Mr. St. Quentin had one of his most severe fits of curiosity about it, but I need hardly say he did not get the slightest satisfaction. My dear, romantic, sentimental, devoted Rose, to think of you being solemnly and circumstantially accused of scheming to make papa marry you! Undue influence, indeed! 'Oh, Sir Pitt! Sir Pitt! I—I am married already!'—only it is Amelia who is in the scrape, and not Becky. I cannot fancy anything more amusing: and how like the people at Drington to get up such a story! Just think of all your care and kindness being thus interpreted! Of course it is not worth being annoyed about for one moment, and it will certainly increase the piquancy of the 'situation,' when the truth comes out. There is no chance, I had almost said no hope, of its coming to papa's ears—no one ventures to talk gossip to him—but if it only could, just imagine the rage he would be in! I am sure it would be quite a revelation to him that any one had ever dared talk of *him* and his affairs; and I could find it in my heart to wish, for once, to see him in one of his very finest frenzies. I flatter myself I have answered Fanny Cooke's letter with admirable discretion. She most sincerely believed she was doing her duty in writing to me. I fully recognized her zeal and fidelity, and then went on to say that I was about to repose a confidence in her which would at once convince her that the rumour she had heard was utterly unfounded, and relieve her from anxiety on my account. I told her that my confidential maid had a prior attachment of long standing, to a young man with whose merits and fidelity to her I was intimately acquainted—that the engagement had already subsisted some years, and that Mrs. Dixon had entered my service, and subsequently assumed her present responsible task, in consequence of this estimable young man's absence in a foreign country, from which *he hoped* to return sufficiently well off to enable him to put an *end to their separation*—that Mrs. Dixon's attendance on my

father was an immeasurable boon to me, and that I most earnestly hoped no ill-natured gossip might ever come to her ears, rendering it impossible for her to continue to do me this great service. Admire, I beg, my dear, the ingenuity with which I have told nothing but the truth, and yet completely routed Fanny's suspicions! You *have* a prior attachment, you *have* been engaged to Walter for some years, and he *does* hope to put an end to your separation. Depend upon it, Fanny will be very kind to you in future, and will put down the village gossip with a high hand. We may safely trust her for that. I was so much amused at the whole business, and so preoccupied with my letter to her, that I have no doubt Mr. St. Quentin is convinced I am 'carrying on' some deep-laid scheme."

It would be difficult to describe the feelings with which Florence read this letter. They amounted to positive horror, and included some of the very keenest suffering through which she had ever passed. The shock of the discovery that she was suspected of a design, which not all the force of her reasoning upon the absolute ignorance of her true history by all around could cause her to think of without a horrible sense of its outrageous nature, was much increased by Miriam's mode of treating it. There was something so keenly hurtful to her delicacy, to her feelings of every kind, in this cruel rumour, and Miriam could regard it only in the light of a joke! She felt as if she must needs sink under this trial, as if it were quite too much for her, the filling up of her cup with a draught too nauseous to be drunk. She shut herself up in her room, and wept the bitterest tears that had ever fallen from her eyes, tears which had an unreasonable kind of humiliation in them. She could not possibly bear this, she thought, and yet, what could she do? To go away would be to lose all she had striven so hard for; and, yet to remain under such a suspicion, watched by the servants, every action imputed to a motive which she shuddered to think of, notwithstanding its absurd impossibility—could she do that? She was turning these

things in her mind, and was feeling quite sick with crying, when she was told that Mr. Martin wished to see her. She went downstairs quickly, without giving a thought to her red and swollen eyelids and pale cheeks.

Mr. Martin glanced sharply at her, as she entered the study where he was alone. Mr. Clint had not yet risen. The doctor had had a hint from Mrs. Dixon, on the previous evening, that he was in one of his very bad fits. These had recurred of late more frequently, and he now made few attempts at concealment, and no efforts at all at self-control.

"H—m," said Mr. Martin, audibly; adding, in his thoughts; "she has heard it, and has been crying her pretty eyes out."

He asked her a few questions about his patient, and then said,—

"I have not met many sensible women in my life, but you are one of the most sensible women I have met. Now, I am going to speak plainly to you. Some foolish people here have been telling lies about you, prompted by idleness and ignorance, and in some degree by jealousy."

Florence sobbed.

"You have heard this, and you were in doubt about what you ought to do. I am right, am I not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, this is what you ought to do. You are of incalculable value here, you are doing your duty admirably, and no reasonable person who has ever spoken ten words to you could believe one word of this nonsense. If you allow it to influence you, you will be very unkind to Mrs. St. Quentin, and very cruel to this unhappy man, who has nothing but increased suffering before him. I took it for granted you would act consistently with your character, before I said anything to you; and I have effectually prevented your being annoyed, by informing Mrs. Ritchie that the gossip had come to my ears, *and that if it reached Mr. Clint's ever so faintly it would*

cost all the servants at The Firs their places. I believe they are thoroughly ashamed of themselves, and that you will have no annoyance whatever. You will promise me to think no more about it?"

"I will try," said Florence, simply.

"That's right. I will go and see Mr. Clint in his room; I cannot wait for him any longer."

Mr. Martin came out from that visit to his patient looking very serious. Their interview had been long and unpleasant. The doctor had never told Reginald Clint before, in so many words, that he was drinking himself to death, surely, and now by no means slowly. He had told him soon this occasion, and in the plainest and most emphatic terms depicted the sufferings to which he would inevitably subject himself. The man's appearance was more ghastly on this occasion than he had ever seen it. A fixed, yellow hue pervaded his skin, and hard red blotches marked his sunken cheeks. He had made an attempt to dress himself, but had been too sick and giddy to succeed, and Mr. Martin found him lying on his bed in his shirt and trousers, exhausted, feverish, and in one of his most sullen and dangerous moods. But he had to deal with the only person who had never been afraid of him.

"I suppose you mean that I can't recover, in any case?" asked Mr. Clint, with a fierce glance at Mr. Martin, instantly turning away.

"I do mean just that; but your life might be greatly prolonged, and your pain much alleviated, if you would use the reason which you still retain, and give up drink. If you would even moderate your indulgence in it, it would make a great difference to you during the remainder of your life."

Reginald Clint raised himself up, hitched his back against the bed, and turned towards Mr. Martin, gripping the bed-clothes in his coarse, bony, yellow hand. His voice was hoarse, partly from illness, but still more from passion, as he said, scowling the while as few but he could scowl,—

"What is it that possesses you to talk such cursed nonsense to me? You know me long enough and well enough to know the folly of it. Give up drink! Do you know what drink has been to me?"

"I think I do. The destruction of your body and mind."

"Don't trouble yourself about my mind, that's not your business. It has served my turn, and it will serve it yet. You can't make me out a madman, you know."

"Not *yet*, perhaps," said Mr. Martin, with grave and deliberate emphasis; "but you are coming to that. You certainly will come to it, if you have a few more such fits as this has been."

"So that I shall not be able to arrange my affairs, eh?—and your worthy favourite, my good and dutiful son, who has not sent me a line for nearly two years, will come in for my property, without any trouble. Is *that* your meaning?"

"Not exactly. You are a long way off the state of mind in which a man ceases to be competent to make an unjust will. The power to do wrong lasts long, unhappily. But you are day by day destroying your judgment, deadening your conscience, and reducing yourself to a lower level of intelligence."

"Hah! Well, as you are concerned only with my body, let me tell you, once for all, and pray remember it practically, for you will be spared a deal of talk, and I a deal of listening; *I will not* give up drink, and I will not drink less, so long as I feel disposed to drink as much. There is nothing else I care for; there's no man, woman, child, animal or thing of value to me, in comparison with drink—or, indeed, of any value at all, and life without drink would be a rotten bargain. You won't get me to make it."

"Good-bye," said Mr. Martin, abruptly, and he turned towards the door, without the least effort to disguise his disgust.

Late in the evening, Mr. Martin received a note from Mrs. Dixon. She was directed by Mr. Clint to request that Mr. Martin would come to The Firs at twelve o'clock on the following day without fail. She added a few words on her own account.

to the effect that Mr. Clint had been very ill all day, and had eaten nothing.

At noon, the next day, Mr. Martin presented himself at The Firs. He found Mr. Clint in his study, seated at his writing-table, on which lay a large folio of foolscap, covered with writing in law hand. Mr. Standish was in the room, and he bowed, without speaking, to Mr. Martin, who was surprised by a certain formality in the appearance of both gentlemen.

"How do you do, Martin?" said Reginald Clint, looking at him with a queer expression. "I am all right, you see, and have sent for you quite in a friendly way. None of your d—d doctoring to-day. I've taken your advice, though, in one respect, if I've neglected your physic; in fact, I had had the same bright idea myself, and I have sent for you to ask you to witness my will."

Mr. Martin looked incredulous and uncomfortable. Mr. Standish spoke.

"Yes, Mr. Martin; this is Mr. Clint's will, for which he favoured me with instructions some little time ago. He particularly wishes for your signature as one of the witnesses."

"If any other, friend—" Mr. Martin began, but Mr. Clint interrupted him.

"D—n it, man, don't you know I haven't a friend in the world but yourself? What objection can you have?"

"I have none," said Mr. Martin, with a mental calculation of the use of codicils, in case he should find out that Walter was ill-treated by this document, and gain the chance of influence by his complaisance.

"Why couldn't you say so at first, then? Now for the other witness. Mrs. Ritchie will do."

"Hadn't you better employ Mrs. Dixon, if you don't want this talked about?" suggested Mr. Martin.

"Mrs. Dixon. No—I—I think not," answered Mr. Clint. His tone was embarrassed, and a quick glance passed between him and the lawyer, who slightly shook his head. "I prefer to employ Mrs. Ritchie."

"As you choose," said Mr. Martin.

The bell was rung, and there was an embarrassed pause. Mrs. Ritchie came, and had the service which was required of her elaborately explained. She complied with her master's request, with that amusing mixture of pride with apprehension of mysterious consequences peculiar to persons of her class who are called upon to "sign" anything, and in a few minutes the proceedings were completed. Then Mr. Martin went away at once on the plea of business, leaving the lawyer and his client together.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHERE IS WALTER ?

WITH the certainty that under any circumstances his life could not be much prolonged, it might have been supposed that some soft, regretful feeling would have come to Reginald Clint. He might have been less morose and cynical, less obstinate in his conviction that, in the long-standing quarrel between himself and his fellows, he only was in the right, they absolutely and wilfully in the wrong. But if any observer had indulged such an expectation, it would have arisen from an imperfect conception of the man's character. We are too apt to regard sickness and sorrow as direct agents for good in themselves, whereas they never absolutely turn aside the ordinary current of one's moral life ; they are what the person who experiences them makes them. Reginald Clint believed what Mr. Martin had told him ; indeed, there was a warning voice within him heard, but in the sense of warning unheeded, which affirmed the truth of the doctor's words. Nobody but himself could tell how difficult he—who, until a comparatively late period, had been a strong man—sometimes found it to live ; how easy it would have seemed to him to relinquish the effort, and allow that deadly nausea, that terrible tremulousness, that overwhelming weakness, to have their full way. And they wanted him to give up drink ; to give up the only thing that checked all these, and pulled him back from the abyss he so constantly neared ! He was not such a fool as not to know that it was also the origin of the deadly evil which he felt within his frame, but it was too late now ; he knew it would always have been too late, at least ever since the time when, if an intrusive vision of his

wife's pale face, as he remembered it in her welcome coffin, and his wife's rosy face, as he could not forget it on her wedding-day, arose before him, he got rid of them both by the agency of drink. He would keep off the big bouts which shook his nerves, and inflicted those dreadful attacks of fear upon him, but he would do no more; and he was not afraid of death. There might be another life, perhaps; he did not know or care much about that; Reginald Clint had not in him even "the *beginning* of wisdom;" at all events, he was getting tired of this present world. People died very easily sometimes, with the aid of drink, and he did not like pain. He had had a good deal of it already, more than any one knew about; he wanted to have as little more as possible, and as to avoiding it by giving up drink, he knew better! At all events—and he came steadily back to this in his thoughts—he would not, and he could not.

He did not. Within three weeks after the making of his will, Reginald Clint had brought himself to a state which, if he had deferred that proceeding, would, in all probability, have invalidated it. His temper, so far from being softened, was more than ever intolerable, and his tyranny such that there was great difficulty in keeping the domestic staff together. Florence bore the brunt of much of this, putting herself as far as possible between him and those whom he had habitually maltreated with his tongue, though never so grossly as now. Her task was a hard one, full of most repulsive duties,—for disease spared nothing to the dying drunkard,—and there was no one to share them with her. In after-days she wondered how she was sustained in courage and in bodily strength throughout that time, with its ever-present horror and its agonizing suspense.

Miriam was informed of her father's state, but Florence found herself obliged to add that Mr. Clint would not receive her unless she came to The Firs alone. He positively refused to admit Mr. St. Quentin into the house. This was a novel development of his extraordinary temper, and Mr. Martin and

Florence were equally at a loss to account for it. But they presently discovered that he had, by dint of long brooding over the matter, conceived a violent animosity against Mr. St. Quentin, in consequence of his victory over him respecting the conditions of his marriage with Miriam. He had been beaten on the point of the settlement; and his morose, ill-conditioned mind, beginning now to be touched with positive disease, ever seeking nutrition for its spleen and ill-will, had fastened on this fact with peculiar avidity. Miriam might come if she chose, but not the plausible old cheat she had married, and whom she would find out some day. She had been in such a hurry to get away from her father, that she had allowed herself to be fooled; let her take care she was not left in the lurch altogether. They could not extract from him any expression of a desire to see his daughter; beyond "she may come if she chooses," he would not go.

Miriam would have gone to The Firs gladly, even on such slender encouragement as this; but she was destined to feel, in this instance, the full weight of the yoke under which she had heedlessly and credulously placed herself. If her father was obdurate, so was her husband, and he had a threat to use which was potent. "You go nowhere without me. If you leave my house, without my permission, on any pretext whatsoever, you need never return to it. Let there be no further discussion of the subject." Miriam had ascertained that this was no vain threat, no imposition on her credulity, in the true spirit of a petty tyrant, but that he had the power to carry it out. So she submitted, and hardened her heart against the man who thus treated her—well-nigh driving him mad by her carefully-displayed contempt. She wrote to Florence full particulars of the battle, and, acknowledging Mr. St. Quentin's victory, declared her intention of rendering it more costly to him than any number of defeats. Florence in reply entreated her to write no more in that strain; she felt she could not bear it, in the deep gloom of the terrible episode through which she was passing. Miriam hardly understood Florence's feelings,

but she respected them, and for some weeks their correspondence was almost limited to the despatch of bulletins on the one side, and the acknowledgment of them on the other.

Reginald Clint asked no questions about his daughter. Whether he thought of her with affection and regret, or with bitterness and resentment, no one could tell. He was generally taciturn, even with Florence, but, at the worst stages of his illness, he was pleased when she was with him, and uneasy in her absence.

The night had come, cool, calm, and silent, after a day of much suffering to the dying man, and of incessant fatigue to Florence. Mr. Martin had left the house shortly before, and Florence's watch was soon to be relieved for a few hours by a hired nurse, who had now been in attendance for some days. Mr. Clint had been asleep for a little while, and Florence, who was sitting by his bed, had allowed her weary lids to close for a few moments. When she opened her eyes she found the sick man had turned, and was gazing at her intently. A change in his face caught her attention immediately.

"Do you want anything, sir?" She approached him as she spoke, expecting the usual craving demand for stimulant, which it had long been useless and impossible to resist. But no such demand was made, nor did the dim, sunken eyes turn eagerly, as they had always hitherto turned on waking, towards the spot where the bottles were kept. He still looked at her, but did not reply. She held back the curtain, and inspected him more narrowly. The change struck her still more forcibly, but it was not a painful alteration; it consisted rather in general unlikeness to the face she was accustomed to see than in any threatening symptom.

"Where is Walter?"

He spoke the words slowly and distinctly, his eyes still fixed on her face. No answer. Florence never knew whether her body started, or in any way betrayed emotion, but she felt as *if she had been shot.*

"Where is Walter?"

She gently kneeled down beside the bed, and answered him in a soothing tone, notwithstanding her terror: "Don't you remember, sir? Mr. Walter is in California."

"I forgot."

He closed his eyes, and dozed for awhile—how blue and sunken his face was, how irregular his breathing!—and she knelt perfectly motionless beside him. It was the first time she had heard his father pronounce her husband's name. Presently he roused himself, and sighed heavily.

"Are you in pain, sir? Can I give you anything?"

"No; I am in no pain—but my head is heavy. I thought Walter was here. I suppose I was dreaming." He spoke very slowly, and with gaps between the words. Then, after another pause, he went on: "I must have been dreaming that Walter was here, and there was something he wanted to tell me. I have not seen him for a long time."

"So I have heard," Florence ventured to say.

"I thought he would have come back sooner, but I suppose he is doing no good out there."

"I have been told that your son is doing well, sir, and that he hopes to return very soon, and prove to you that he has profited by his experience."

"Ah!"—in a vague manner—"it will be too late soon." He drew his breath heavily, and his chest laboured. Florence rose, gave him some wine, which he drank without eagerness, and then quietly resumed her former attitude. "Walter and Miriam," he said, "Walter and Miriam."

"Should you be glad if they were here, sir? Do you wish to see your daughter? Do you want her?"

"No!" but there was no fierceness in his tone, no scornful repudiation of feeling; "I don't want her—I don't want any one but *you*."

No words came to Florence.

"I have not been so blind and insensible as you may have thought me. I know very well what you have been to me. I might have died like a dog in a ditch if it had not been for you, and I don't want any one else now."

"Oh! sir, don't say that! If only for my sake, don't say that!" Florence had found words now, and was holding his passive hand in both hers, while still the ghastly eyes gazed into her face. "If I have been of any service, of any comfort to you, I ask for only one acknowledgment, for only one reward. Let me tell your children that you have thought of them with affection, that, whatever the cloud was which came between you and them so long ago, it has quite cleared away. Let me tell them this—to the daughter who will come to you at once, and to the son who will not be long in coming. I hope, I pray, I believe, he is on his way already. But whether he comes soon, or not until he cannot hear it from your own lips, let him know that he is forgiven. Whatever his faults towards you were, he has deeply, bitterly repented of them; he would give all the world can ever bring him to undo them, or to know that they no longer dwell in your memory."

Unheeded, unconscious tears were streaming from Florence's eyes, and falling on her hands, and on that one which she held.

"Think of his long banishment from home, of his kind and loving heart—I do not think you ever knew him rightly—and spare him the anguish of knowing that you had left him unreconciled to him, that there was bitterness in your heart. I pray that you may be left with us until he comes home; but lest it may not be so, say some words of comfort for him to me. Do say them—ever so few—here, now, to *me*!"

Her earnestness hurried her away from all caution and restraint, and yet she did not lose sight of her patient's state: her voice was not raised, and she knelt quite still.

"I dared not mention his name," she went on, "though I have so longed to speak it to you, all these months; but now, now that you have spoken it to me yourself, I do no wrong. Give me a message of reconciliation to your son."

"Give *you* the message? What do you know about my son? Why are *you* pleading his cause?"

Florence took a desperate resolution. She had not any

doubt that Mr. Clint was dying. His son should not carry through life the burden she had found well-nigh intolerable for a few years. She resolved to tell him the truth.

"Sir," she said, "you have to forgive him many things, but one thing above all, and it is because of that great fault, that great sin against you, that I am pleading to you now. Only for that I should not be here, and Walter would be beside you. I entreat you to pardon him, and me too, for I am Walter's wife!"

"Walter's wife? You!"

There was surprise in the feeble voice, but not anger. There was something like awe, but not scorn.

"Yes, I—I, the girl you were told about—I, Florence Reeve."

She laid her head upon her hands, still folding his, which he did not withdraw, within them; and there was no sound but her low sobs for some minutes. It was all over now; she had done the worst or the best she could, which it was circumstances must decide; but whatever that decision might be, she was, at that supreme moment, conscious of a sense of relief. Her head was full of whirling thoughts, and her heart was beating fast with fear and anguish, but the burden both had carried so long was gone. No matter what else might happen, her husband's father could not now die wilfully deceived by his only son.

"Married to you! And you here like a servant!" He spoke low and faintly, but she caught the sounds. "Tell me all about it. Don't be afraid."

Then she told him, without moving from her kneeling attitude, without losing his hand, but checking her tears, and speaking in the soft, distinct voice which had been very pleasant to Reginald Clint for a long time. She went back to the death of her mother, and dwelt on Walter's conduct to her at that time; and then she told of the circumstances which had led to their hasty and imprudent marriage. Mr. Clint seemed to understand her narrative perfectly, and to follow it with atten-

tion ; she knew that he had in his mind the points of comparison between it and the story he had heard from Mrs. Clewer. Only one thing she did not tell him—that she had been led to believe the separation between Walter and his father complete before she knew him. She would shield herself from no particle of blame, but him from all she could.

“We were both very young, sir,” she pleaded simply, and now with perfect composure, “and very lonely, and we loved each other very much. I had no friend or protector except Walter, and he did this wrong thing for my sake. And then, when he had to leave me, because we were so poor, he wished to leave me near the only friends he had—for indeed Walter always knew you would be good to me, if the truth came out, and, and—if he never came back. And this too was done hastily, and because we were in a kind of desperation ; and it was my fault, because I was foolish, and afraid of being left quite alone. I know I don’t deserve that you should forgive such a great deception, but you will forgive Walter—for it was all my fault ?”

No answer. But no withdrawal of the eyes, nor of the hand.

“When I came back here, and you began to be ill, and were so kind to me, I determined to deceive you no longer ; but I could not tell you the truth without Walter’s leave, and I wrote to him, and entreated him to let me tell you, and ask for your pardon for both of us. His letter must come to me soon, and I know what he will say in it, and how thankful he will be to know that I have besought you for him.”

“Who knows of this ?” He spoke with difficulty, but her quick perception discerned the inflection of the old jealous pride in his tone. How many of those who lived in daily contact with him were aware of the trick that was played upon him ? To how many had he been an object of ridicule ?

“No one. Not a living soul but Miriam, and Walter, and myself. She has been the truest and the best of friends to me, and I sorely need her pardon too, for she did this for Walter’s sake.”

"For whose sake have you been to me all that she never was, or could be, or Walter either?"

In all his life Reginald Clint had never spoken with such dignity, or such softness, as in these few words, which held Florence spell-bound. When she replied, it was in the lowest whisper,—

"For Walter's sake, sir, and for your own, because I love you."

Again there was a long pause, and then Reginald Clint turned restlessly, and with a moan of pain, and said,—

"I believe you. There was one other woman in the world once who loved me—that is a long time ago—but no one else. Not Walter, and not Miriam, only their mother, and you." He laid the hand he had drawn away from hers upon her bended head. "I forgive him, for your sake; and I bless you, my child!"

While Florence was still kneeling, speechless and weak with many emotions, there came a knock at the door. She rose and noiselessly admitted the nurse, who said at once, on seeing her face, "Is he worse?"

"I think so," whispered Florence. "Come and see."

They stood together on the side of the bed nearest the door. His face was turned away, and he seemed to sleep. They interchanged looks, but no words. Florence resumed her former position, and there was profound stillness, until Mr. Clint opened his eyes and said to her,—

"Who is there?"

"Only the nurse. You do not mind her?"

"No; I don't mind her; but don't you leave me. Stay with me until the morning."

"I will stay with you," said Florence; and she drew her chair close to the bed, where his waking glance could fall upon her. The nurse sat within the shadow of the curtains on the other side, and thus the two women commenced their silent watch.

It remained unbroken for some hours. It was many weeks

since Reginald Clint had had so much sleep, or such freedom from pain.

In the early morning he muttered a few words, and Florence bent over him to catch them. He was not asking for anything, and the words had no meaning that she could discern. He was only saying, "After all, I have done him no wrong!"

He never spoke again, coherently. A few hours more, and his sleep had deepened into stupor, and after two days the stupor sunk into death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“AFTER ALL, I HAVE DONE HIM NO WRONG.”

IMMEDIATELY after it was made known in the village of Drington that Mr. Clint was no more Mr. Standish presented himself at The Firs, and asked to see Mrs. Dixon. The state of mind in which the event, ensuing so rapidly upon the disclosure she had made, had left Florence, was exceedingly painful. She had an intimate, consoling conviction that her husband's father had not received her communication with displeasure, but this conviction she could not impart to any one, and she suffered extremely from the dread lest the revelation she had been irresistibly impelled to make should have in any degree, by the mere action of surprise, accelerated Mr. Clint's death. The end had come so unexpectedly, it had almost stunned her; and her position of responsibility, unbacked by recognized authority, was quite agonizing. In the very presence of the dead man; as she watched the bloated features settling into the calm which lends dignity even to such a wreck as Reginald Clint, the question would arise: What was she to do now? He was dead; not, indeed, as she had dreaded so that her powers of feeling seemed engrossed by that one terrible fear, without forgiving Walter; but nothing, except in point of that sentiment, was altered. He had forgiven Walter, and blessed her; but let the dispositions he had made, if there were any such, in the time of his fiercest anger, his most obstinate estrangement, be ever so hard and unjust, they must remain unchanged now. It had happened according to the desire of her heart, but it was all too late.

There was something more appalling to Florence in this

death than in any other which had ever signified anything to her. Here was the stillness, the solemnity, the decorum, the circumstance, the ceremonial of death—but no grief. A decent regret on the part of three or four persons, a formal gravity of demeanour observed by the dead man's servants, and tempered by much conjecture about their chances of mourning and gratuities. But grief there was none. No riven hearts shrinking from the thought of a new day, to arise on their unwelcome life, yearning with horrid anguish over the least little remembrances of the one, so lately all-engrossing in action, as well as in thought, and suddenly become so terribly unreal. Could there be anything so dreary and dreadful, Florence thought, as a house of mourning wherein were no mourners?

She had gone through the few sad formalities, and was resting, after having written to Mr. St. Quentin, to request that he would communicate the fact of her father's death gently to Miriam; and had just decided that she would consult Mr. Martin with respect to her own immediate movements, when she was told that Mr. Standish wished to see her. She went to the study immediately, and there she found the lawyer and Mr. Martin. Mr. Standish was seated in the place which Mr. Clint had habitually occupied, and the circumstance gave Florence's tender heart a stab. The place of *him* who lay there, upstairs, white and silent, already knew him no more. Florence bowed to the two gentlemen, and Mr. Martin placed a chair for her.

"You wished to see me, sir?" She addressed Mr. Standish.

"Mrs. Dixon?"

She bent her head in assent.

"I received instructions from my late client, Mr. Clint," said the lawyer, with a formal civility which made Florence uncomfortable, "to make the contents of this memorandum," *producing a paper as he spoke*, "known to you and Mr. Martin as soon as possible after his decease. You will be so good

as to take them into account in making the necessary melancholy arrangements."

Mr. Martin made no reply; and Florence had nothing to say. Mr. Standish then read the memorandum, which was signed by Mr. Clint, and consisted merely of a few lines directing that his funeral should be very private and very plain and that, prior to it, his will, which he had placed in the custody of Mr. Standish, should be read.

"When it suits you to have this done," said Mr. Standish, addressing Florence, "I shall be happy to attend for the purpose." It was evident that she was expected to act in the absence of any direct representative of Mr. Clint. But she appealed to Mr. Martin, who undertook to do all that was necessary; and it was finally arranged that the will should be read on the day before the funeral, by which time Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin would probably have arrived at The Fir. This agreed to, Florence rose and left the room, feeling a little curious, and disturbed by Mr. Standish's manner, which was with all its formality, not quite respectful.

The hours dragged on, as they always do drag on while the dread presence of the dead is with the living, heavily and wearily. On the third morning Miriam and her husband arrived. Mr. St. Quentin's sense of decorum did not fail him on an occasion in which there was no real sadness to him. He conducted himself with perfect propriety, but Florence was conscious of the displeasure with which he observed his wife's incautious greeting of her supposed maid. Mr. St. Quentin had a peculiar faculty of making his anger felt without transgressing good manners, by cold, ironical politeness and well-arranged contempt, which Florence remembered, and understood which she had often cringed. She felt his anger in the slighting glance which passed over, but never lighted on her; in the slighting tone of his bare acknowledgment of her; the "How do you do, Dixon?" which made Miriam's face burn, and her eyes flash. When the sisters-in-law found themselves together Miriam burst into a bitter complaint of Mr. St. Quentin's

duct towards her, even before she inquired of Florence the particulars of her father's death.

"I do really believe he is mad," she said, "though there isn't much consolation in thinking so, since I cannot get rid of him by the conviction : he certainly is the most hateful and persecuting old man in existence. Do you notice how his bad heart and odious, suspicious temper are telling on him, Rose ? He is shrivelling up into such an ugly old man ; I am sure he looks many years older than poor papa did."

Florence was silently thankful that Miriam was never to know what her father had looked like in the last days of his life. The face had been hidden away for ever before his daughter's arrival ; and there was nothing to disturb that merciful process, to which the very best among us must owe so much one day, by which death blots out the memory of faults, and fixes the memory of every claim which the departed had to urge upon the affection and regret of his fellows.

"He is looking old."

"Yes, and wicked—downright wicked. Ah, Rose, how wise and right you were when you warned me, in this very room" (she glanced around it forlornly), "that the way of escape I seized upon so eagerly might not be a way to happiness."

If Miriam had but known that the tyrant she had been so anxious to flee from had only a short time to live, how much might have been spared her ! She did not think out this thought, but no doubt it was there, lurking in her mind ; and Reginald Clint was, in this respect, reaping what he had sown.

Miriam heard Florence's account of her revelation to Mr. Clint with great interest and emotion, and without any participation in the misgivings from which she was suffering. To Miriam's mind, the few words which her father had spoken were satisfactory and conclusive. Making the fullest allowance for his state at the time, and the near approach of his death, Miriam was not to be convinced that if her father had felt *angry* he would have concealed it, or been induced by any

sentiment of gratitude to or consideration for Florence, to express any other feeling than anger. The last coherent words he had uttered—"*After all, I have done him no wrong!*"—duly reported to Miriam, were as inexplicable to her as to her sister-in-law. If they alluded to the rumours he had heard about Walter and Florence Reeve, they were not to be understood, unless he actually believed that a marriage had taken place; and any other meaning they might have had was completely out of the reach of the two young women. They might have been merely rambling, semi-conscious words, but Florence could not regard them as such; faint though their tone, their manner was purpose-like. There was no conclusion to be arrived at; they had to close their discussion where they commenced it. The whole of this day Miriam passed in seclusion in her own rooms. She had left Bianca in Paris, and Mrs. Dixon seemed to resume her former functions naturally. It was agreed between the sisters-in-law that after the funeral the truth respecting Florence should be told to Mr. St. Quentin. Miriam was much distressed by the necessity for the disclosure, but she had no choice. Florence was now homeless and unprotected, and Miriam must provide for her in some way, until her brother's return, let the terms of Reginald Clint's will be what they might. That Mr. St. Quentin would not permit her to fill her former position in his house Miriam felt assured, and she expected her to prove still more obnoxious as Walter's wife. The night closed around hearts full of anxiety, and disturbed by heavy care, in the house where lay the dead man for the last time but one.

"I am particularly directed, by the terms of this memorandum, to request Mrs. Dixon's presence at the reading of the will," said Mr. Standish, when, on the following day, he met Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin, Mr. Cooke, and Mr. Martin, in the dining-room at The Firs, for this prearranged purpose.

At this announcement Miriam looked surprised, and Mr. St. Quentin looked angry and aggrieved.

"A most extraordinary direction, I must say," he objected,

turning himself about pompously in the huge red-leather chair, which he had assumed with a president-of-council kind of air.

"What can *she* have to do with the matter?"

"That may perhaps be explained," said Mr. Standish. "With your permission, Mrs. St. Quentin, I will send for Mrs. Dixon." He stretched his hand towards the bell, but Mr. Martin prevented his ringing it.

"Stay!" he said; "I will go and fetch her;" and left the room for the purpose, with an odd look of sudden intelligence in his face. He found Florence in the anteroom to that in which the coffin was awaiting removal, and told her his errand, adding, "There may be something agitating and painful for you in this, my dear; but you will, I am sure, be as you always are, patient and strong and self-possessed."

Florence glanced at him, as the unusual appellation in so unusual a tone passed his lips, but she said nothing; she merely rose, walked down the stairs by his side, and, obedient to his gesture, passed into the dining-room in advance of him. Miriam, who was extremely pale, greeted her entrance with a faint smile, Mr. Standish bowed, and Mr. St. Quentin said, with disdain,—

"You can sit down, Dixon. You are required, it seems, to hear Mr. Clint's will read."

Mr. Martin placed Florence between himself and Miriam, and, with a queer glance at Mr. St. Quentin, said to Mr. Standish that they were all ready and attentive. The lawyer then untied the outer cover of a parcel of no great size, which lay on the table before him, and broke the seal of a large blue envelope. It was evident that Mr. Clint's will was no voluminous document; and the reading of it, after the accustomed preamble, did not occupy five minutes.

The will was as clear as it was concise. The testator bequeathed all the property, of every kind whatsoever, with an exception hereafter to be mentioned, of which he died possessed, to "the best, [kindest, truest woman it had ever been his *fortune to meet*; to her who had alleviated the last months of

his life, when both his children had forsaken him ; to the only person in the world in whose disinterested services he had confidence, and to whom he now tendered this acknowledgment ; to the young woman known as Rose Dixon, formerly in the service of Mrs. St. Quentin, the testator's daughter." The will appointed Mrs. Dixon sole executrix, and Walter Clint's name had no mention in it. Miriam's had a place, but an inconsiderable one. Mr. Clint bequeathed to his daughter the sum of one thousand pounds, and certain jewels which had belonged to her mother, with the agreeable proviso, which Mr. Standish read out with an irrepressible twinkle of satisfaction in his keen grey eyes, that the money was to be allotted to her sole use and benefit, as the testator did not wish any advantage to accrue from him to the "wealthy cheat" his daughter had married.

Florence did not faint. She could not stand, or see, or speak, but she was conscious—conscious that Mr. Martin had taken firm hold of her—that Miriam, with a cry of "Oh, my darling!" had thrown herself on her knees beside her, and was clasping her round the waist and crying wildly—conscious that Mr. St. Quentin had struck the table violently, and declared, with a great oath, that the will was an unparalleled infamy, too bad for even the drunken madman who had made it, and that Walter Clint should break it—conscious that Mr. Cooke and Mr. Standish were profoundly silent.

Presently the room became steady, it ceased to swim before her eyes, and she found Miriam, rudely grasped by Mr. St. Quentin, and forced up from her kneeling attitude beside her ; but Mr. Martin did not loose his hold of her.

"How dare you disgrace yourself in this way?" said Mr. St. Quentin to his wife, in a voice half-suffocated with anger. "What do you mean by calling this woman endearing names, by putting yourself on a level with a vile schemer, who practised on your mad and drunken father, and has done her best to rob yourself and your brother? A woman of whom I always had the worst opinion, and would have turned out of my house."

she had not left it for her own purposes. What do you mean by it, I say ?”

“Mr. St. Quentin,” said Mr. Martin quietly, “if you are not conscious of the extreme indecorum of your conduct on the present occasion, and of the impropriety of your language, it becomes necessary for me to remind you that we who are present cannot permit you to behave in this manner. You must not apply such language to Mrs. Dixon.”

“And who the devil are you, sir, that you should dictate to me ?”

“I am Mr. Clint’s oldest friend, and one of the witnesses to his will.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself to acknowledge it.”

“I had no knowledge whatever of its provisions. I am not prepared to say that I approve them ; but I am prepared to say that the description which Mr. Clint has given of Mrs. Dixon is as correct as the epithets you have applied to her are unmerited.”

“Indeed ! My wife’s servant seems to have made an extraordinary impression. I believe *you* are a bachelor, and have money to leave away from your relatives. You and these gentlemen”—indicating Mr. Cooke and Mr. Standish, with a sneer—“are, of course, at liberty to think and act in this matter as you please. As for me, I consider this house no fit place for my wife, and I shall remove her from it forthwith.”

“Hush ! my dear ; keep quiet,” whispered Mr. Martin to Florence, who, shrinking into the recesses of her chair, and trembling, seemed to be trying to speak.—“I conclude you do not mean that Mrs. St. Quentin is to leave her father’s house before his funeral ?” he added coldly.

“I *do* mean it ; I will not attend the funeral of the disreputable old drunkard, who was such a fool and such a scoundrel as to be led by the nose by a woman in this way.” He turned suddenly on Miriam : “You will get ready to leave this house in half-an-hour, and during that time I forbid you to have *any conversation* with this person.”

During this angry dialogue Miriam had stood quite still beside Florence's chair, not touching her, not looking at her, but following every gesture of Mr. St. Quentin with her great golden eyes, filled with anger, disdain, and a terrible dislike. After he had pulled her up from her knees, she had shaken his hand from her arm, with a loathing shudder, as if a toad had touched her; and, even in that moment, he had been conscious of the action, and of the disgust which it betrayed. Miriam had never been so completely off her guard before; he noted the fact, understood it, and never forgot it.

When he uttered this peremptory order she made one step forward, and confronted him, her face entirely colourless, her lips set, her eyes gleaming.

"I will *not* leave this house," she said, in a low, harsh voice, uttering every syllable with deliberate will; "either now, or at any other time, in obedience to you. Your detestable behaviour has broken down every barrier of restraint which would have prevented my speaking openly before these gentlemen, my father's friends and my own. I will remain here, and I will see as much as I please of her" (she touched Florence's hair with a caressing hand), "whom my father loved, who was more to him than I ever was, or would have known how to be; whom he has rewarded, to the best of his ability, and whom he appreciated at her proper value.—Gentlemen!" Miriam made a gesture with her hand which directed their attention from herself to Florence—"in a short time you must have known the truth, which Mr. St. Quentin's intemperate language obliges me to disclose before we had intended it to be proclaimed. How false every word he has uttered is, you are all aware; you need nothing to strengthen your conviction of that; but even *he* will be ashamed of himself when he learns that this lady, my beloved friend, called here Rose Dixon, is Florence Clint—my brother's wife—and that before my father died he knew it."

Mr. St. Quentin did not leave The Firs; but neither did he attend the funeral of Reginald Clint. He had been somewhat *hotly pursued of late* by a much-dreaded enemy, fatal to his

most cherished pretensions to youthful energy and fascination—gout. Aided by the stormy emotions to which he gave their passionate way, it came up with him, and dealt him a hard blow. He found himself condemned to the double humiliation of being Florence's guest and Mr. Martin's patient.

When the wonder and excitement of these events had somewhat subsided, Florence and Miriam, comparing notes of their feelings, found that in the case of each the first conscious impression made by the reading of the will had been its elucidation of Mr. Clint's mysterious words, its explanation of how indeed, "after all, he had done his son no wrong."

CHAPTER XXVII.

LETHE.

"ARE you awake, Walter?"

"Yes. Have I slept long?"

"Three hours. And a sound refreshing sleep, I hope?"

"I feel much the better for it. I am getting on very well; am I not?"

"Very well indeed; you will soon be quite yourself again. Do you feel equal to a short palaver now, or shall we put it off until to-morrow?"

"Oh! no; I am quite able to listen, if not to talk much. Is there any news?"

Walter Clint asked this question carelessly, in a casual kind of way, not by any means with the eagerness and intensity of one just returning to the active interests of life, of one from whom they had been shut out through many long weeks of severe and exhausting suffering. It was not thus that Lawrence Daly had expected him again to take up the thread of life; it was with far other anticipations he had watched him gradually reviving to impressions of surrounding things, and resuming somewhat of his old familiar looks. The time had seemed intolerably long and wearisome to Daly, even when the first apprehension had subsided, and hope of Walter's recovery had taken its place. The unshared burden of the two secrets—that of the death of Walter's father, and the extraordinary turn of fate which had made the disinherited son the owner of all his father's property; and that of the hidden nugget—weighed heavily upon him. He longed exceedingly for the moment when they might be freely discussed between himself and

Walter ; when they should revert to the hopes which had preceded this time of trouble, and find them strengthened and perfected by the strange, unexpected intelligence from The Firs. Lawrence had little or no apprehension about the effect which his father's death might produce upon Walter. There was such ample compensation in the narrative contained in Florence's letter, and the chances that any better understanding should ever exist between the father and the son had been, by Walter's own admission, so infinitesimal, that there was little to fear. It would be a shock to Walter, and a transient grief ; but the good news was lasting, and a full realization of all he could have hoped—a secure, happy, comfortable home ; and a safe future for his young wife and himself ; an end of their trials and of their separation. Daly had almost persuaded himself that, even in his languid, half-conscious state, Walter must perceive that something unusual was occupying his mind ; but it was not so. Walter was quiescent, incurious, and even now, when directly appealed to, only moderately interested. There was no trace of the impatient, desperate eagerness to get away, to begin that homeward journey rendered possible by the acquisition of the nugget, which Daly had been prepared to remonstrate with and control.

The letters lay in the locker, and Daly sat near it, intending to take them out at the appropriate moment. Walter's wistful, thin, pale face, looking very handsome, notwithstanding its wanness, was turned towards him, and his head was supported on one almost skeleton hand. His hollow blue eyes were scanning Daly's face and figure, which still showed traces of the illness he had gone through, though his recovery had been comparatively rapid, and he had not suffered physically from his late watching and fatigue.

"I have had a worse bout of it than yours," began Walter.

"Yes ; very much worse, and lasting three times as long. Since you have been ill, several things have occurred which I want to tell you about ; and first—there will be no difficulty, *as soon as you are able to travel, about your getting to England.*"

"No difficulty ! What do you mean, Lawrence ?"

"I mean that strange things have occurred in England. Letters have arrived. Don't you remember we were expecting them just when you took the fever ?"

"Yes, yes ; go on : give me the letters."

"Presently. You must let me tell you something about them. First, there is a great change in all your prospects, Walter."

"Is—is my father dead ?"

"He is," said Daly solemnly, utterly surprised by the question, for Mr. Clint's death had not been likely, according to the former letters they had received. Walter said no more, but covered his face with his hands, and lay quite still.

"This must be a great shock to you," Daly began, after a long pause ; but then Walter interrupted him.

"I don't think it is, Lawrence. I cannot explain or understand why, but in some strange way, during my fever, I think I knew it. I tried to tell you once or twice, but I could not be certain whether I knew it, or had dreamed it. However that may be, it is not a shock to me. My poor father ! It was not a happy life. I trust it ended better. And now he cannot forgive me, and I cannot tell him I was not the bad fellow he believed me. It is all too late."

Daly was not sorry to see that there were tears in Walter's eyes, and that his lips were trembling.

"It is not too late. This is the surprising news that I have known all the time you were in the fever, and have so longed to tell you. It was your wife who was with your father in his last days, and she told him all the truth, and got from him his forgiveness for you, and his blessing for herself."

"Good God ! Florence with my father—and she told him !"

"Yes ; she told him, like the brave, true woman she is, and so saved you both from the burden of self-reproach and regret. She is the wisest, as she is the best of women. Here are her letters ; I opened this one—marked immediate—when you were in the earliest stages of the fever, because I had seen the

announcement of your father's death in a newspaper which came with the letters."

Daly put the little packet into Walter's hand. He looked at the covers, the seal of one was unbroken, but he could not yet open them.

"What has become of her?" he asked. "Tell me."

Daly told him. He related the contents of Florence's narrative, not, indeed, in the words of the wife, whose sacred and self-sacrificing love had been so freely poured out in the letter in which she summoned her husband home, that Lawrence felt as if he had been almost guilty of profanity in reading the words intended for those beloved eyes only; but clearly and convincingly. No more anxiety for Walter as to what had become of his wife, from whom he was bidden to accept his rightful inheritance. The brief nervousness of astonishment, the brief bewilderment of mingled and contending feelings, passed rapidly away, and Walter was able to read the letters, which gave him a clear account of all that had happened, but from which he gathered that there had been one, of urgent importance, written by Florence, which he had never received. She spoke of her great anxiety for the arrival of his permission to tell his father the truth, in reply to her letter, in which she had repeated to Walter Mr. Martin's warning. That letter had not reached him. Had not Florence obeyed her instinct, with what bitterness the good fortune which had befallen them must have been dashed!

The first bewildering emotions subdued, Walter and his friend talked freely of the prospects thus changed, and of the future, so unlike any they had thought of. Daly told Walter how hard he had found it to keep all this news to himself, while awaiting the moment of convalescence in which it might be safely imparted; and how anxiously he had looked for some disposition on his part to ask questions, and take up life once more from the active side. At this Walter smiled languidly, and said that he had not thought much of anything past, *present, or future*; there had been intangible impressions float-

ing about him, but not thoughts, like that one about his father's death, and he had not been able to feel anxious ; he believed anxiety was a doubtful privilege of health, which vanished before illness. At least he had not been able to feel it, either about himself or any one else ; it had awoke on behalf of Florence only with Lawrence's words.

Even now there was no impatience in his mind. Daly, while he could not resist the pleasure of talking and letting him talk about The Firs, about his childhood, and his boyhood there, about all that he and Florence would now do to render the place pretty and pleasant ; in all which plans the presence of Daly was an understood thing—was afraid of the effect upon Walter. Now he would surely begin to count the intervening hours, and to fret at the remains of weakness, and the necessary delay before beginning the return journey. But the day wore on, and the young men still discussed the strange turn of their fortunes, and there was no nervous excitement about Walter to justify Daly's apprehensions.

"There are two sides to proverbial philosophy," said Daly, in the course of their long talk ; "and we, at least, are in case to bear witness that if 'it never rains but it pours,' the shower is sometimes golden. How strange it is that this unexpected solution of your difficulties, this fitting recognition of your wife's merits, and our own stroke of luck, should have occurred all about the same time !"

"*Our own stroke of luck !*" repeated Walter. "What do you mean ? Not our two fevers, surely ? With all your cheerful philosophy, I don't think you can reckon *them* as lucky."

The slightest possible misgiving arose in Daly's mind, as he replied,—

"Fevers ! No, of course not. Why, Walter, what can you be thinking of ? I am speaking of our nugget."

"*Our nugget !* What nugget ? Have you been finding a nugget ?"

"Certainly not. One is almost enough, I should think, for us to expect, especially with a run of luck to follow."

An indescribable fear stirred among Lawrence's nerves as he spoke thus cheerily.

"One almost enough! My dear fellow, I have not the slightest notion what you are talking of. Do tell me, pray; I am prepared for anything after what you *have* told me."

"You are *prepared*! Why, Walter, you are incomprehensible! I am talking about the nugget which we found, and which caused us to determine on your returning to England in any case; of the nugget which you concealed, you know, because you could not leave me in the fever, to go with it yourself to Placer-Ville."

A puzzled look in Walter's face, an uneasy straining of the eyes, but no light of returning memory or comprehension.

With increasing trepidation, Daly went on—"I am speaking of *that* nugget. You surely remember it, Walter? Don't you recollect the day we found it, and how delighted we were—and how you were warned of the bad state of things in the valley, and that we had better send off our dust as soon as possible—and then I was taken ill, and Spoiled Five came to you with another warning, and you hid the nugget?"

The tone in which Daly put these questions was full of distress and apprehension, more so than he knew, and it was responded to by Walter's painful, troubled, striving face.

"I don't know what you mean," he said; "I have not the least notion of what you are talking about. I remember the dust, and I remember the time being fixed for sending it to Placer-Ville. But I don't know anything more. Where is Spoiled Five? Is he not here? I have not seen him since I have been ill."

"Good God!" thought Lawrence, "this is too terrible! Am I to bring her husband back to her a madman?"

"What is the matter, Lawrence? Why do you not answer me? Where is Spoiled Five? And where is Sambo? He is not here, I know; the dog's bark I sometimes hear is not his."

"Spoiled Five has gone away," replied Daly, preserving his *calmness* by a desperate effort, and moving into a position in

which Walter could not see his face. "He has gone a long way off down the valley, to do some hut-building. You remember, I daresay, that he was very much afraid of any one who was 'off his head,' and when we both took to being so, in the fever, it was too much for Spoiled Five. Sambo is dead, poor fellow; he was killed by accident."

"Poor Sambo! And so Spoiled Five is gone! What a queer thing fever is, and how it sets one off on all sorts of imaginary tracks! I remember having a horrid notion that he had come to some harm, and being haunted with a longing to know all about it, and yet afraid to ask—one of the phantom horrors of the fever! I wonder when he will return—before we go, I hope. Perhaps we could induce him to come with us? Flo would give him free quarters at The Firs, I am sure."

Lawrence could not command his voice sufficiently to reply. The wooden cross, with its rough inscription, in the green God's-acre which had been spared to the dead out of the swarming valley, seemed to stand before his eyes. Walter went on speaking a few disjointed sentences before he could interpose with another effort to arrest his attention.

"But to return to the nugget. Try and recall those days before you were taken ill. You remember Deering, the doctor whom you brought to see me, and who went away with the dust-waggons to Placer-Ville?"

"Yes," answered Walter, hesitatingly; "I have some recollection of him."

"And yet none of the nugget? None of your coming in and finding him with me, and giving him your letters to your wife and your sister, and walking with him as far as the bluff?"

"No," said Walter; "none."

"And yet you were, to all appearance, quite well that day, and for some days later. Have you no remembrance of telling me where you had been that morning, and what you had done?"

"I have no remembrance of anything about that time," Walter answered slowly, after painful searching in his mind.

Daly took up his right hand, and looking carefully at it found on the wasted wrist a white mark, the cicatrix of a healed cut. He made Walter look at it, and asked him if it did not make him remember something—how he had cut himself with the rough rock in burying the nugget, and how Deering had dressed the cut with lint and plaster? But Walter, looking wistfully at the scar, and with the same painful groping in his unresponsive memory, declared that he remembered nothing of the matter. And, as he repeated this assurance again and again, there came a strange nervousness and avoidance into his manner, which Lawrence observed, but could not interpret. He shaded his eyes with his hand ; and then, when Lawrence came within his sight again, looked at him from beneath that shelter, with a keen, searching, anxious glance, in which there was suspicion.

"Tell me this story of a nugget, which I ought to know, and have forgotten," he said at length, when a long series of questions from Lawrence had been severally answered with the same protest of oblivion.

Lawrence complied ; and all the time he was relating the incidents which had preceded the murder—of which he carefully kept clear—Walter watched him closely from under his hand, and by degrees a look of comprehension came into his face, the expression of one who has arrived at a conclusion, painful indeed, but with the grim satisfaction in it of the solution of doubt, the termination of uncertainty.

"And where was it I told you I had buried the nugget, in obedience to Spoiled Five's warning?" asked Walter, when Daly had recapitulated all that had occurred.

"You did not tell me anything about that," said Daly. "I was only getting well at the time, and you said very little about it, only just enough to put my mind at rest. Then came your own illness ; and now you must do your best to remember where the nugget is, so that as soon as you are able to be about we may get it, and wind up our affairs here without delay."

"Very well," said Walter ; " I will try to recall the place and the circumstances, when my mind is a little clearer ; but I am tired now, and I really cannot think of anything but Flo's letter. So suppose we don't talk about it for the present."

"All right," said Daly, who was terribly disturbed and perplexed, and wholly unconscious of the anxious and apprehensive, regretful affection with which Walter was at that moment thinking of him, to the exclusion of the strange events which had befallen.

"What a dreadful thing this is !" ran Walter's thoughts. "Daly has never recovered that fever—he has a fixed delusion in his mind ! What shall I do ? There is nothing in it but to humour him, and keep him quiet, and to get him away as soon as possible."

Nothing more was said about the nugget that day. On the following and two or three succeeding days Lawrence tried by many indirect means to strike the dumb chord into sound, but in vain. Walter avoided all attempts to lead up to the subject with a skill the origin of which Lawrence was far from suspecting, and which completely baffled him.

For some time the distress which this peculiar mental affection of Walter's caused his friend was so keen that he could think of nothing but its significance as regarded Walter himself ; but as he lay awake, pondering over it, on the second night after he had discovered it, he bethought himself suddenly of the double importance and value of the memorandum which Walter had made in his pocket-book. As soon as it should be safe to bring forward the subject again, the sight of the memorandum in his own handwriting would, no doubt, remove the temporary cloud which had fallen upon Walter's intellect, and which had not invaded any other province of it, so far as Lawrence, by the closest investigation, could discern, and enable them to recover, without delay, the precious deposit, concerning which he had until now been so indifferent.

Early on the following morning, Daly made search for the pocket-book among a lower stratum of multifarious objects which had lain for weeks in the locker undisturbed. He found it, a shabby folding-case of green leather, spotted with grease, rubbed at the corners, and strongly scented with stale tobacco. With an instant misgiving Lawrence Daly opened it, and found, not the collection of motley articles familiar to him as the contents of Walter's pocket-book, but the small surgical instruments, the roll of lint, and slab of sticking-plaster, which he remembered to have seen in Deering's possession.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOR ENGLAND, HOME, AND BEAUTY.

THE result of Lawrence Daly's discovery was that he resolved to preserve perfect silence on the subject of the nugget, unless by some fortunate accident Walter should give an indication of returning memory. He immediately took the precaution of telling such of the miners as Walter was likely to see, that they must not talk to him of Spoiled Five, because the fever had weakened his nerves, and he could not bear it. The roughest and most heedless among them would not have refused compliance with his request. Walter had tired himself out, on the day after he had read Florence's story, by writing to her at great length, in order to avail himself of an opportunity for despatching letters which then occurred. When at length he threw down his pen quite exhausted, it was with the remark, that he ought to have written to Miriam, but he was too tired ; Miriam must wait.

"She will be disappointed," said Daly ; "lie down for a bit, and let me write from your dictation. I shall like it ; it is quite a new sensation for a lonely fellow like me to write a letter, even though it's not my own."

Walter gladly assented ; and the letter, a short but emphatic one, was written and folded to be enclosed in Walter's imposing despatch, addressed to "Mrs. Clint, The Firs, Drington, Hampshire." It was the first time Walter had written to his wife under her real name, and he looked quite fondly at the superscription, before he held out the document for Daly to take and seal.

"What shall I write on this?" asked Lawrence.

"Oh! just 'Miriam.'"

Lawrence complied. He, too, wrote the name very slowly, very distinctly, and he looked at it when it was done.

While the friends were busy with their preparations for departure, and Walter was taking it for granted, without the least suspicion or misgiving, that Daly was to accompany him to England, and share his home, always, if he chose, but at least for an undefined period, Lawrence was much occupied in debating with himself what he should do. In reality he entertained no purpose of going to England. Why should he? Walter had become independent, by an extraordinary and fortunate accident; but his own position was not very materially better than it had been when they came out to the Golden State. The few hundreds of pounds which would be his share of their joint acquisitions—exclusive of the nugget, which had but mocked him with an illusory success, a mirage of the mine—could not do much for him. Should he induce Walter to intrust his share also to him, and try his luck in the speculating world of New York, always reserving a sufficient sum to enable him to resume the old work, in the same or some other district? It would be hard for him to part with his friend; and Walter would feel it so too. But Walter had an entirely new life to face, fresh ties to form, old associations, of a date anterior to their meeting, to renew, and would soon cease to miss the familiar companionship. Lawrence had none of these things in the Old World; to him the New was as homelike, and it offered better chances. He would wait awhile, until the associations of their present life should be broken through, and novelty had had its effect on Walter, before he would undeceive him; and, besides, he had something to do at San Francisco, which was the first point they were to make in their return journey.

Deering had said he was going to "roll down New Mexico way," a sufficiently vague indication of his intentions, and one *which would, had it been carried out, have precluded Law-*

rence from any hope of finding him. But he had heard, from some new chums who had arrived at the gold-fields during Walter's illness, that Deering had been seen at Sacramento, where he had been playing high but unsuccessfully, and that he had told several of the party that his intention was to go to San Francisco and take charge of a ship for New York—being inclined to give civilization and Wall Street another trial.

Lawrence determined to find Deering, if possible. He took it for granted that this man had Walter's pocket-book in his possession. If he had missed his instrument-case he would have come, or sent back to the lone hut to fetch it; but finding the unsuspected substitute he would be content, and go away without a notion of his loss. On the recovery of the pocket-book depended his sole chance of finding the nugget, and removing the cloud of oblivion from Walter's intellect. If he should succeed in recovering the clue to the hidden gold, he thought of proposing to Walter that they should part at San Francisco, when he would return to the scene of their toil and secure it in their common interests.

In many imperceptible ways Lawrence tried experiments on Walter's memory before they commenced their journey, but they were all unsuccessful. In everything connected with the incidents which immediately preceded the fever it was a blank.

When they were fairly on their way—when the life of the lone hut, and the busy, toiling mining settlement, shut by the great mountain ramparts within the beautiful, desecrated valley, had been left far behind them—the impatience for which Daly had looked began to manifest itself in Walter. The time seemed endless to him which at first he had hardly admitted to be tedious, and misgivings crowded fast upon him. By the time they reached San Francisco Walter was almost ill with impatience, and Lawrence began to feel doubtful about the propriety of leaving him, even if he should find out Deering, and discover all he wanted to know.

To any one not aware of the strange gap in his memory,

there would have been no reasonable cause for inquietude about Walter, but Daly never forgot that fact, and he associated with it an irritable and impulsive manner which had come upon Walter. He could conceal from Florence the whole of the circumstances connected with the nugget, if they should ever meet, and the evil be still unattended; she need never be aware of her husband's loss of memory; but, supposing he were to show other symptoms of a mental shock or twist, one of those mysterious disarrangements of the mystic mechanism of the intelligence which baffle science—what then? *That* could not be hidden from her, and Lawrence dreaded to think of what she would suffer. In his bodily health he was very well, but the fever had considerably altered his appearance. He looked much older than he really was, and his once luxuriant chestnut-brown hair was thin, and thickly sprinkled with grey. Daly had remarked upon this to him, wondering whether it was an ordinary result of the kind of fever he had had; but Walter had told him it was hereditary; at all events, his mother's family all turned grey in their early manhood and womanhood, and he should not be surprised to find Miriam white. He talked to Lawrence a good deal about Miriam, speculating gaily upon the surprise and discomfiture which must have been sustained by Mr. St. Quentin, and his probable feelings towards himself.

On their arrival at San Francisco, Daly set about inquiring for Deering without loss of time. He had a sufficient inkling of that gentleman's character to enable him to make a very fair guess at the sort of places in which he was most likely to be found, or to be "heard of." His intuition was not at fault, and in a few days he had discovered all that it was necessary for his purpose to know. He must travel farther, if he would find Deering, who, after a few weeks passed in all the wildest and most dissipated scenes of "Frisco" life, had sailed, only six days before the arrival of Lawrence Daly and Walter Clint, for New York.

This was unfortunate, but not such a contretemps as it

appeared. Lawrence felt reluctant to part with Walter, while so great an interval of time and space lay between him and his home. "What does it matter about me?" he would say to himself, half carelessly, half bitterly. "There's no woman, a thousand times too good for me or for any man, waiting for *me*; there's no one to mind whether I go back to the Placers, or on to New York, except Walter, and I will go with him; I will see him safely off to his pretty wife and his good fortune, and then—we shall see!" Deering had gone to Panama in charge of a passenger-ship as surgeon, which did not look as if the rolling-stone had yet disproved the proverb; and would be sure to be heard of at the agent's, and other places frequented by the ship's officers.

The arrangements for their sailing to Panama by the first ship were speedily completed, and then Lawrence carried out another project. There was resident at that time in the chief city of the Golden State a certain Dr. Drewitt, famous for his treatment of nervous disease. His practice was very extensive, for the nerves are sorely tried by the toils and the pleasures of life in that golden country, which ought to be the easiest in the world to live in, as it is incomparably the most delightful. But drink and excitement, the mad, murderous violation of the laws of health, the ill-treatment of the mortal machines by their unruly tenants, are too common there, and Dr. Drewitt's hands were full. Lawrence called on this gentleman, and told him all the circumstances connected with Walter's sudden and extraordinary loss of memory. Dr. Drewitt listened to the narrative with attention and interest to the end, when he asked Lawrence whether he had been quite over the fever at the time it attacked Walter, and whether any intimation of danger to the dust they had on the premises had been conveyed to him at a time when his own mind was under the influence of illness? At these questions Lawrence smiled, perceiving the drift of the doctor's speculations.

"You think, perhaps," he said, "that the screw loose in *this matter may be in my brain, and not in that of my friend*

—that I may be under a delusion, and he not the victim of a sudden interruption of memory. But it is not so. I am quite aware that, if such were the case, I should assert the contrary as calmly and as strenuously as I am asserting it now, and therefore I will say no more on that point : but, if you will allow me, I will at some future time inform you of the result of the search I am bent upon making for Deering and the pocket-book.”

Dr. Drewitt kept a steady gaze fixed upon Lawrence, whom it by no means disconcerted. “There are two sides to every story, wise people say,” remarked the doctor; “and I may perhaps wish to learn both sides of this one. Tell me as precisely as you can what was the latest impression, to your knowledge, made on your friend’s mind before he received the shock which brought on delirium; and what length of time intervened between his telling you about the concealment of the nugget and the commission of the murder.”

Daly informed Dr. Drewitt precisely on these two points, and told him that he had reason to believe Walter had felt the approach of illness before the night on which the murder was committed. Then the doctor, having taken a short time to consider his replies, told him that in certain cases of fever this partial and special loss of memory on the subject of the latest strong impression made upon the mind was, though not frequent, of occasional occurrence. It was an unaccountable phenomenon, and might be removed, as it had come, suddenly, at any time—perhaps years hence; or it might never be removed, and there was no help for it. It did not necessarily imply any further injury to the brain, and was consistent with sound general health.

When Daly had taken his leave, Dr. Drewitt remained for some minutes leaning against the mantelpiece in his consulting-room, in an attitude of cogitation. Then he took out of a press underneath a row of book-shelves an armful of newspapers, and selecting a few, after examination of their dates, *searched* carefully through their columns. He soon found

what he was looking for, and began to read steadily. When he had done reading he put away the newspapers, and proceeded to make some notes in a book which he took from a locked drawer.

"Mr. Daly is in the right," he said to himself, as he dipped his pen in the ink; "the other evidently knew nothing about the murder. The newspaper accounts of it entirely confirm that part of Mr. Daly's story; and that being positively, the remainder is presumptively, true. Very hard on him, if he does not find this other man! And certainly one of the oddest of the many odd things which have come in my way. When Mr. Clint called on me this morning, and explained that he had come to consult me, in all possible privacy, about the mental condition of a friend whom he had reason to believe the victim of a delusion, a fixed idea—and I told him, as I have just told Mr. Daly, that there was nothing to be done, I never doubted the truth of the story for a moment. I wish I could see more of this case! It only proves once more what I learn every day—how much less wise I am than people take me for. No doubt I *shall* hear more of it, for, though he behaved most admirably, Mr. Daly winced under my suspicion, and will be so anxious to convince me that it was unfounded that he is certain to let me know the result of his search. A very strange and valuable addition to my collection of puzzles."

The advice which Dr. Drewitt had given to each of the friends tallied so exactly that it produced perfect harmony of action. Each was watching the other, in unspoken hope of a possible result, and the subject most frequently in the thoughts of both was never alluded to by either.

During their tedious voyage Lawrence enlightened Walter respecting his own intentions. At first Walter was both angry and hurt; but by degrees Daly made him see and acknowledge the unreasonableness of his expectation that their life could be any longer in common, and he submitted. Daly then proposed that Walter should intrust to him his

share of the proceeds of the "dust" they had found, for investment in some of the American enterprises which he had been studying of late, and to this Walter gladly assented. He had great reliance on Daly's judgment, which was not lessened or injured by his perception of that strange delusion which had grown up in Lawrence's mind since the fever, of whose persistence he was perfectly aware, though Lawrence was so careful never to allude to it, and from any hint of which Walter shrunk with an uneasy nervousness. Indeed, he had the same sort of nervous feeling, though not to anything like so great an extent, about all reference to their life at the gold-fields. It had become not only indistinct, but distasteful to him; and as it was inevitable that he and Lawrence should talk about it, he began to think he could be reconciled to a separation from his friend, which would lessen the vividness of their associations with a life which had become so suddenly and unaccountably painful to him to recall. And then Lawrence had promised to come to England after three years at the outside.

The voyage was irksome to them both, but especially to Daly. Walter slept a great deal; he had acquired the habit of much sleep since his illness, and had pleasant plans and prospects during the waking hours; but things were dreary with Lawrence.

The ship was small, their fellow-passengers were uninteresting, the voyage was long; and when, having crossed the isthmus, they had once more embarked on the other side, and were steaming to New York, Lawrence assured himself that, even if he should find the clue to the hidden treasure, he would not undergo the toil of the journey again, while the small sum he could command should show any inclination to increase and multiply. He would be satisfied with it, and leave the gold in its grave.

On their arrival at New York they went to the post-office, with a vague hope of finding letters. It would be like Florence, *they thought*, to have written again on the chance. And she

had done so. There was not much news in her communication, which was full of hope and joy in the prospect of her husband's return, and contained many affectionate assurance of welcome to Lawrence Daly. She gave a droll description of Mr. St. Quentin's humiliation under the levelling rule of the gout, of his unwilling civility to her, and the haste with which he had departed, accompanied, sorely against the grain, by Miriam, so soon as he could extract an admission from Mr. Martin that it would be safe for him to travel. The St. Quentins were in Paris, and Miriam only less impatient than Florence for Walter's return.

At length the term of the long companionship of the friends had arrived. The last words had been spoken, the last hand-clasp exchanged, and Lawrence Daly, feeling very forlorn, was standing on the levee, watching the lessening form of the Cunard steamer, as she ploughed the blue water, long after he had ceased to distinguish Walter's figure on the deck.

The levee had been much crowded, but it was getting clear. The people who had had business to do there had done it, and gone away; and the people who had no business, and therefore stayed longer, grown tired of loafing and looking at ships, and listening to steam-hisses, were going. Through the lessening throng a man came towards Daly, unobserved by him, as his gaze still followed the ship, and stood by his side, silent, for a few moments. Then the man touched him lightly on the arm, and spoke to him, and Lawrence Daly, turning his head sharply round, saw Deering.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WELCOME HOME.

It would have been impossible to turn The Firs into a pretty spot by any method short of such a root-and-branch reformation as the pulling down of the old house, and the construction of a new one on a totally different plan and in another aspect. But it was possible to materially improve the ill-favoured, neglected place, and Florence turned all her attention to doing this, during the interval which must elapse before Walter's return. It was a part of the fidelity of her nature that she never forgot the tastes, the fancies, the lightest-expressed wishes of those whom she loved ; and the defects, shortcomings, and ugliness of The Firs had been well known to her long before she had ever seen the place, which was now her own property ; and she was familiar with all Walter's ideas of what he would have done, had it been his.

One of the most common forms in which such a morose and sullen temper as that with which Reginald Clint had been cursed exhibits itself, is an unreasonable and captious jealousy concerning the possessions of its victim, which resent a suggestion as an aggression, and the least manifestation of interest as a wrong. A constant uneasy suspicion that somebody wanted to interfere with him, a totally uncalled-for spirit of protest that his possessions were his own, possessed him. He would fret and fume for hours at a careless suggestion from Mr. Martin that the trees were too thick in one of the plantations, or that the pond below the clover-fields would be the better for *cleaning*. *He affected extraordinary secrecy in all his affairs, and*

changed his *employés* so often that no one ever took any real interest in the place. Miriam and Walter understood him perfectly in these respects, and had early learned to abstain from saying or doing anything to imply a common interest in The Firs, or the assumption of even the most trifling authority within its gates. In the case of Miriam this indifference was perfectly genuine. "If the house were on fire, and I had got safely out of it, I should not turn my head to see whether it was burned to ashes or not," she had once said to Florence. This was but slight, if any exaggeration ; but it was not so with Walter. He had a lasting regard for the old place, and though he truly believed his father would leave it away from him, he had never arrived at contemplating that contingency with total indifference. Hence Florence's acquaintance with his ideas of what might be done for the improvement of The Firs. The terms of Mr. Clint's bequest to her did not impose any conditions ; and, in a very short time after the donor's death, Miriam suggested to Florence that she would do well to get Walter's consent to selling the property on his return. The neighbourhood was a rising one. Whole rows of staring, ugly, red brick houses, and diminutive villas, with vivid venetian blinds, and top-heavy porticoes, had sprung up between The Firs and Drington Station. The Firs would be valuable building-ground. But Florence did not take kindly to the suggestion. Miriam did not know how much Walter liked the place, and what pride and pleasure he would take in carrying out all his old plans for its improvement. "Besides," urged Florence, "you must remember that I do not hate rurality as you do."

"No, indeed," Miriam had replied to this ; "you are just fit for it. Only I don't think you will ever have your own meat killed on the premises ! My dear Rose, all your muttons are pet lambs, and you will let the fowls die of old age ! It is a fine thing to be in love," she went on, somewhat irrelevantly. "I do believe you could live happily with Walter in a back kitchen or a snail-shell, if *he* had everything he wanted, and *he* was perfectly comfortable."

"Of course I could," replied Florence, seriously ; and then, after a moment, she smiled : "I won't answer for the back kitchen, Miriam ; I'm afraid I should be a nuisance there ; I'm horribly afraid of beetles."

"I don't believe you're afraid of anything, except Walter's being delayed, or something happening to him. There, the colour has gone from your face in a moment ! Ah ! well, that is the only thing I fear either, so that we are alike there. And you really are going to begin your renovations as soon as you get rid of us—a precious incubus we are to you !"

Florence protested earnestly against this. Miriam she dearly loved, and Mr. St. Quentin had been decently civil to her. She had hoped they would remain until Walter's return. Surely Miriam must feel that the house and all in it was as much hers as it had ever been.

"An unlucky comparison !" said Miriam, with an uneasy laugh. "If I had ever felt as much at home at The Firs as I feel now, I should not have been in such a hurry to escape from it. You must not be deceived by Mr. St. Quentin's civility, my dear : it does not mean much of anything probably, but what it does *not* mean is that I am to have the indulgence of being with my brother. He cannot endure the mention of him ; if he finds out I have heard from him, he sulks for days together. He is more jealous of him than he is of you. The fact is, notwithstanding all my praiseworthy and persevering efforts to mislead him, I believe he has *not* succeeded in persuading himself that I have a lover, therefore his jealousy is obliged to feed itself on my one real and acknowledged affection : and the aliment is decidedly unwholesome. I can't altogether blame him for being rather savage, though he did bring it on himself, for, of course, if I have not succeeded in persuading him that there is something real which I am hiding from him, he *must* know I have been deluding and laughing at him."

"Miriam, Miriam, a dangerous game !"

"*Florence* Florence, don't preach ! If"—here Miriam's

face changed and darkened—"if you could know how degrading and detestable a lot mine is, you would wonder I could play at any game less serious or final than drowning myself! As for my seeing Walter, I don't expect it, unless he comes to me, undeterred by Mr. St. Quentin's exquisite facility for making people uncomfortable. No, no; depend upon it, I shall be permitted to come here only as a bribe for future good behaviour. Well, it cannot last for ever, that's one comfort—not but it may last my time."

Then she left Florence, and did not afterwards renew the conversation. She was right, as has been seen, in her surmise. Mr. St. Quentin took her away, and Florence was left, with even increased misgivings about his sister's future, to her engrossing and delightful preparations for Walter's return.

The lawn was transformed after a fashion which its late proprietor would have regarded as wasteful to the last degree. A deep sunken fence, faced with stone, and surmounted by a handsome railing, over which numerous plants were in time to climb and twist, would henceforth keep the cattle at a distance, rendering them picturesque but not intrusive; and the ground thus subtracted from the purposes of severe utility was turned into just such a flower-garden as Florence and Walter used to sketch, Alnaschar-like, in their cottage in George Lane. Light paper and hangings, and some pretty new furniture, did wonders for the gloomy sitting-rooms; and no one would have recognized the study, a room which had, as Florence knew, more unpleasant associations for Walter than any other in the house.

When the changes were all made, Florence still had plenty of time on her hands to think of the strangeness of her position, and, having thought it out, to grow used to it. Acting on the concurrent advice of Miriam and Mrs. Cooke, she had dismissed all the servants, and engaged others. They had been liberally treated, but of course they were discontented, and equally of course they were censorious. Susan was impertinent *also*, and took occasion to mention pretty widely in the neigh-

bourhood that there was more in all that affair at The Firs than people understood, or thought for. Only Mrs. Ritchie was equal to the occasion—*she* resigned! It would be a false position, she observed, for Mrs. Walter Clint and for herself, and she had, all her life, avoided false positions. So she departed from The Firs; and whether Robert attached himself to her fortunes, as he had given her every reason to believe he would do, or whether he kept his often plighted troth to Susan, this chronicle does not record.

Florence found ardently zealous supporters in the small world of Drington and its environs. Probably it would never have occurred to her to care or inquire what people, of whom she knew nothing, thought of the strange events in which she was so deeply concerned. She knew little of the world, and was so far from being self-engrossed that she would not have regarded herself as a subject for anybody's curiosity had not Mrs. Cooke enlightened her. That excellent woman, who was very much distressed by the remembrance of her own unintentional mistake, made *amende honorable* in the handsomest and frankest manner to Florence, and became her very sincere and efficient friend. Mrs. Cooke had not only the legitimate *prestige* of her position, but she was personally popular and influential, and when she was resorted to by the ladies of her acquaintance, in the agonies of their curiosity amid the conflicting rumours afloat in the neighbourhood, she related the true story with much pathetic effect, and never failed to declare her belief that the neighbourhood had gained a "decided acquisition" in Mrs. Walter Clint.

"You can easily imagine the difference it makes to Mr. Cooke and myself to have such a charming neighbour at The Firs," she would say to each questioner, and then hint at the pleasure it would give her to invite the individual in question to meet Mrs. Clint at dinner at the Rectory, when she should be going out again. In a short time, people who had never before been inside the gates of The Firs were asking Mrs. Cooke how soon they might venture to call on Florence; and

long before Walter's return his pretty, gentle wife had become a general favourite. The committee of the Ladies' Book-Club, a most exclusive institution, under the rigid censorship of a literary lady—who had written "quite an immense deal," but had not appeared in print, because her family considered that sort of thing "low"—had invited her to become a member. The Drington Dorcas meetings were brightened by her sweet face, and aided by her busy fingers. Mr. Martin was her sworn ally; and Mr. Standish confessed to that gentleman—who had never liked him, and henceforth, rather unreasonably, disliked him more than ever—that he had believed the scandal about her until the day of the reading of the will, and that then he was ashamed of himself.

"And so you ought to be," was Mr. Martin's brief comment.

"You must recollect Clint's will was a very extraordinary one, and I had never seen her before it was made, and only once afterwards for a few minutes."

"*Half* a minute ought to have been enough to make you ashamed *then* of such a belief," said Mr. Martin, irascibly. Whereupon Mr. Standish called to mind the coarse sarcasm which Mr. St. Quentin had uttered in his wrath, with reference to Mr. Martin's bachelor condition, and murmured to himself, "I should not wonder if the old nabob were right, and Martin were spoons on her too."

It was on a beautiful day in early autumn that Walter Clint returned to the home from which he had been so unjustly banished, to find the utmost desire of his heart fulfilled. He had reached Liverpool on the previous evening, telegraphed his arrival to Florence, and started by the earliest train in the morning. A serene stillness was over the face of the earth and the calm, blue sky. The trees—with their many-tinted foliage, sad when looked at singly, but gorgeous in their grand masses, overspread with countless shades of brown, and russet, and gold—were quite motionless, and the few leaves which fell ever and anon dropped silently on the grass. Sound

travelled far in the deep stillness of the weather, and Florence leaning out of an open window at the top of the house, could hear the monotonous rattle of the train many miles away. The sun was declining, the delicious scents of evening were blending with the air. As Florence leaned out, breathless, and feeling, now that he was really coming, that it could not be, that it was all a dream, and yet, at the same time, that nothing else could be, that this was the one truth, she heard the grating of wheels, and saw the dog-cart she had ordered to be sent for Walter driven rapidly down the avenue. She could not stand another moment. On her knees by the window-sill she watched now, and heard the two sounds—the monotonous rattle of the train as it neared Drington Station, and the rapid whirl of the wheels of her own carriage on the road. Presently both ceased.

She had put off her heavy mourning for that day, and wore a white dress with black ribbons. Her fair brown hair was curled upon her neck, as Walter had liked to see it, as she had not had the heart to wear it during his long absence. Good God ! his long absence !—how long, how terrible it had been ! She only realized it now—now, when it was all but over. How had she ever lived through it ? It seemed utterly impossible that she could have endured it. All the pangs of this dreadful time, this cruel waste of their brief lives, this irreparably lost treasure, seemed to be mingled with the assurance and the expectation of that hour. She had planned this event, this meeting, a thousand times over, and now not one incident would resemble her fancied sketch of it. She was to have looked at herself in the glass, and finally touched up her dress before he came, and run down to meet him at the door, when she should hear the dog-cart return. But the sound of wheels is on the road now, and Florence cannot stir. She cannot think of what her dress is, or how she looks in it, or whether everything is right downstairs. An extraordinary tremor and weakness have hold of her ; she shrinks from the *intensity of her own joy* ; the whole of the past is in these

moments, and yet there is inextricable confusion of thought in them too. The sound of the dog-cart is in the avenue, but Florence cannot stir. All the doors are open below, and, ringing clear through the surging and beating in her ears, she hears Walter's voice. "Where is she?" he says, and some one answers: and then swift footsteps flee up the stairs, and cross the room, and Walter holds her in his arms!

* * * * *
* * * * *

"Oh, Walter; to think of your having had that frightful fever, and my never knowing anything about it! To think that you might have died, at the very time I was preparing for your coming home! How awful! how awful!"

"My darling, don't cry so. You are crying as if it had all happened, whereas none of it happened. I am quite well, and with you, and everything is a thousand times happier and better than we ever could have hoped for."

"I know, I know, and I *am* thankful; I *am* happy, but you must let me cry a little, until I can get over it, Walter. I seem to see it all, and live through it, even now, and the terror of a great escape from a fearful danger is upon me."

"*It was* a bad fever," said Walter, trying to check her very unusual vehemence of emotion by speaking carelessly; "but I am none the worse for it, though, of course, I am changed. But then, you must remember, long journeys and hard work and time tell on one, little Flo; and if I am thin and brown, and my hair is grizzled, there are reasons besides the fever. I assure you I am perfectly well; I wish I could say as much for Daly, poor fellow! He was hit hard, in earnest."

"He said in the letter he wrote for you—how little I dreamed there was any cause for your employing him, beyond the hurt hand you pleaded!—that he had been ill. Was it a fever like yours?"

"A much worse one it must have been, though it did not look so at the time, and he was not ill nearly so long. But"—here Walter's face grew puzzled and downcast—"he has

never recovered it, in one serious respect. His mind has never been clear since."

"Walter! Can it be possible? Oh, poor fellow!"

"It is very sad. But do not mention it to any one; it may be all right by the time he comes home; and even now nobody but myself could tell that he has a fixed delusion in his mind, for he is perfectly rational in every other respect, and it is only to me he would mention the absurd notion he has conceived."

"What is it, Walter? May I know?"

"You shall know as much as I do, my darling," replied Walter, in an embarrassed, uneasy tone; "and then let us drop the subject, for I don't like it, as you may suppose. Lawrence fancies that he and I dug up a big nugget at our claim, and that I buried it somewhere while he was ill. He bothered me with innumerable questions when I was recovering from the fever, and, though I persisted in avoiding any reference to it, I could see his mind was quite full of the craze up to the time we parted. Of course, it made me very unhappy."

"Then there was no foundation at all for such a notion?"

"Not the slightest."

"Walter," said Florence, after a pause, "is this—his mind being quite clear on every other point—insanity?"

"I don't know," answered Walter hastily; "it is certainly a craze, but I don't think it amounts to *that*."

"Thank God! I must always love Lawrence, for your sake and for his own, and regard him as my dearest friend, whatever befalls—but—you never found out what a coward I am?"

"No indeed, little Flo, I never did; and considering the scenes you have gone through here, I should think no one else ever did."

"Ah, but they might have done so. I am dreadfully afraid of any one whose mind is in the least disordered. It is weak and wrong, I know, and I wish I could get over it, but my

flesh creeps, and my heart quails at the mere thought of being with a mad person."

"Don't talk, don't think of Daly as *mad*," said Walter; "he will be all right when he comes home. Let's talk no more about it." He rose, sighed, and walked about the room. Florence followed him with her eyes. His face was sad and puzzled.

"His happiness is not perfect," she thought. "This is a great grief to him. What had I better do? Not ask him questions about their life abroad, which would direct his mind to this misfortune. And yet I did so long to know every particular. However, that must be given up."

It was never very difficult for Florence to resolve on giving up her own wishes on any subject. She mentally made the sacrifice, and adhered to it. Walter was now standing beside the glass door of the study, which opened no longer upon a narrow, rough, gravelled pathway, but upon the smooth shaven, green grass-plot of the new flower-garden. His profile was turned towards her, and as she looked at him she realized, for the first time, how much he was altered. Climate, hard work, and illness had indeed been busy with him. The brightness of youth had gone from his face, and there was no startling contrast between the thin features and embrowned complexion and the prematurely grey hair. Florence's heart overflowed with thankfulness as she gazed at him. She was convinced that she must indeed have been very near losing him. Presently he said, with a shake of his head, as if discarding a painful impression, "What was your last news of Miriam?"

"I heard from her two days ago. There was nothing particular in her letter. She seems to be enjoying herself in her own way."

"I don't understand her or her way, I confess. I cannot reconcile myself to that marriage of hers; and—I'll tell you what, Flo, I shouldn't wonder if the old man left her nothing, or next to it; or if he does leave her his money, that he *hampers it with some condition to destroy its value.*"

"Oh, Walter, do you think he would be so wicked?"

"Yes, I do; and I'm not quite sure it would be so very wicked if he did, either; at least, of course it would be spiteful, but not so entirely unjust. You must acknowledge Miriam tries him a good deal; and as she undeniably married him for his money, as there never was a plainer case of bargain, I think she might keep her part of it a little more liberally."

"He worries and degrades her by his senseless jealousy."

"No doubt; but who suffers by it most?"

"He does; I suppose."

"Of course he does. How happy we might all have been, as things have turned out, if Miriam had not made this great blunder! However, that is another unpleasant subject; and I will neither talk nor think of it. I will think," he continued, seating himself beside her, and encircling her with his arms, "only of the wonderful fortune which gave a fellow like me such a wife as my little Flo."

They were very happy.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LIE CIRCUMSTANTIAL.

"NOTHING is so likely as the Improbable, and therefore I ought not to be surprised," said Lawrence Daly, as he shook Deering's hand with a cordiality which owed its origin mainly to the sense of strangeness in a strange place being relieved by the sight of a face, known, if not familiar. "But I *am*; for you are the very man I wanted to see, and have been inquiring after, ever since we reached New York."

"Indeed!" said Deering, with a sharp glance at the speaker. "Your inquiries were not successful, I should think, for there's not a more thoroughly 'unknown' man in the Empire City. Why did you want to see me? I caught sight of you as you came off the gangway, but could not make my way to you sooner. How are you now? All right again? You look as if the voyage had picked you up considerably."

"Completely. I'm all right again."

"And your chum, Clint?"

"He is all right too, and is off to England. Did you not see him on the deck, at the top of the gangway?"

"No; you were half-way down when I recognized you. And so he's gone home, is he? You've done well then, I presume. No offence in asking; remember, I'm an Englishman, and therefore capable of conceiving that there may be."

"None whatever. We have not, as a fact, done remarkably well, and certainly could not have struck work so soon, but for a series of strange circumstances. Which way are you going?"

It appeared that Deering was going nowhere in particular.

and so they walked back together, in the direction of Tremont House, Broadway, where Daly and Walter had been boarding since their arrival in New York.

"No," continued Daly, "we were very moderately prosperous, except in one respect; and that exception forms a strange story, even in this land of the wonderful, in nature and adventure. One bit of good luck came to us just before I took the fever only to be lost again. Do you remember Clint's going to fetch you that time?"

"Of course I do; and the Irish fellow who was about your claim, the man with a maimed hand. He was murdered afterwards. I saw an account of it in the papers."

"Yes, poor fellow, he was. That was the worst of all that befell us. His death was indirectly caused by our piece of transitory good luck."

"Indeed! How was that?"

Lawrence Daly began to tell him their story. Deering listened in profound silence, not interrupting him by either a question or an exclamation, but glancing at him from time to time from under his bushy, red eyebrows, with close, curious, and suspicious scrutiny.

"The murdered man knew all about the finding of this nugget?" he asked at length, when Daly had reached the episode of Spoiled Five's death and Walter's delirium.

"I don't know; I can't tell. He said one thing which seemed like it, but I have no certain knowledge. It was just before my own illness."

"But Clint must know. The man was somewhere about your hut, the day I was there last; and, by-the-bye, the shock of the murder no doubt intensified Clint's fever, and acted directly on the brain, but it did not cause it. You may take *my* word for that."

"Take *your* word! Why?"

"Because the seeds of fever were in him that day. Because I knew he was ill, when he walked out of the hut with me. *Because I distinctly remember thinking, when I bade him good-*

bye at the bluff, that I shouldn't wonder if he was in for the fever."

"You might have told him so, and warned him; or turned back, and contrived to let me know, if such was really your impression."

"What would have been the good?" said Deering, carelessly. "It had to come, and I could not have waited to pull him through it. It all came right in the end, it seems."

"No; it didn't. Wait awhile, and you will see that in other respects than the murder of poor Spoiled Five, it came very wrong in the end—so wrong that I am still on this side of the world, with my fortune to make, and the best I can to do with Clint's share of the little we did make; for the nugget is gone, hopelessly gone, unless *you* can help me to recover it."

"I!" exclaimed Deering, standing quite still in his astonishment, and looking at Daly, as if in doubt whether his words were meant for an affront. "What the devil do you mean? What do I know about your nugget?"

"Nothing—and yet you must give me the clue to it, if I am ever to recover it. You remember the day you came to tell us you were going, and took some letters for Clint?"

"Yes, yes; I remember perfectly; but what—"

The two men had been standing still, but people began to hustle them, and Daly, taking Deering's arm, walked on.

"Clint had just returned then from hiding the nugget, and he had made an accurate memorandum of the spot in his pocket-book. Have you any recollection of his taking out the book in your presence?"

Deering perceptibly started. There was no doubt about it; the arm which Daly was holding revealed the sudden tremor of the man's nerves. But he answered, slowly and unmoved,—

"Yes, I recollect. What then?"

"You were going to dress a cut in his hand—a cut received in hiding the nugget—and you used a green leather instrument-case for the purpose."

"Which I must have lost on that occasion, for I never could find it afterwards."

"You left it in the hut. And now comes the strangest part of my story. Clint's mind became affected in the fever, and when he recovered he had entirely lost all recollection of the finding of the nugget, of his having concealed it, and, in short, everything about it. I was not much distressed by this at first, except for his own sake, for I remembered that the pocket-book would guide me to the place, and when I could *show* him the gold he would be all right again. But I looked for Clint's pocket-book ; it was not in the locker, and I found instead of it—this."

He took from a deep breast-pocket the small green leather instrument-case, and again stood still for a moment. Deering did not start now ; he took the case from Daly's hand, and turned it over carelessly.

"I knew what was coming," he said. "I always had an idea I had dropped this in the hut, and picked up the old empty pocket-book I found, days afterwards, in my pocket, by mistake."

"Just so. You have it still ?" asked Daly, eagerly.

"No, indeed ; I have not. There seems to be quite a fate over the thing. I lost it on board ship ; it fell out of my pocket one day when I was leaning over the side, watching some dolphins in a gale, and I very nearly went over with it.—But don't look so glum, man ; it was no loss to either you or me, for there was nothing in it."

"Nothing in it ! Are you sure ?"

"Cock-sure. I remember Clint's taking the letters of which I took charge out of it. A paper of needles and some pack-thread were its sole contents, when I looked into it next, at Placer-Ville."

"Was there no sketch, no memorandum ?"

"Nothing of the sort. Not a scrap of paper of any description. If there had been, of course I should have sent it back. I should have known then, *for certain*, where I had picked up the pocket-book, and what had become of my instrument-case. Of course I *guessed*, but neither was worth the trouble of an exchange."

"Very extraordinary!" said Daly. "Clint gave me an account of his hiding the nugget, as clearly as I am speaking to you now, and most emphatically told me he had entered the particulars, with every needful indication, in that unlucky book."

"Precisely so. And you are bewildered at finding that he had done nothing of the kind!—bewildered, though you have just told me Clint's mind became disordered in the fever, *which was on him at that very time*, and that he has lost every trace of memory of the whole transaction! But if you think, you will cease to be bewildered. There is, in reality, nothing very surprising in the matter; the whole thing was a delusion of Clint's. There's the explanation in a word."

"How could that be? I found the nugget. It was in my possession, in my own keeping, for days before I fell ill; and if Clint did not hide it—if the whole story of the concealment, and the memorandum in the book, be a delusion, what had become of the gold? It was gone; there is no more mistake about *that* than there is about our having found it. How can you square that fact with your theory?"

"Very easily, my dear fellow, though I am sorry to say it, for your sake. I explain the case thus—partly from the circumstances you have just related to me, and partly from my own observation of Clint on the day I saw him last, which was the day of the supposed concealment of the nugget, and *immediately after that concealment*. He was ill then: I saw it—saw it within a few minutes after we left the house together—saw it in his walk and in his eye—heard it in his voice, and almost told him so, if I remember rightly, certainly hinted to him that he would do well to take care of himself. The delirium was coming on then."

"But three or four days elapsed between that and the murder?"

"No matter. There is nothing more subtle, more baffling, more impossible to account for, than the origin and progress of these fevers. I have known cases of their being dormant in

the system for weeks, ay, even in these climates ; there would be nothing surprising in that in England. You had both been anxious to get your gold down to Placer-Ville ; Clint had had mysterious warnings from the lame man—a vagabond, no doubt, with a mental reservation in favour of not being a party to robbing you, if he could avoid it—”

“No, no,” interrupted Daly ; “you must work out your theory without *that* element, You did not know Spoiled Five ; I did—he was no vagabond.”

“Very well, then, he wasn’t—as you please. At least, it is quite plain he knew what people who were vagabonds were doing, or intended to do. He put Clint on his guard ; and Clint’s brain, already in the gripe of the fever, manufactured a whole sequence of delusions out of the warning. Depend upon it, he no more buried the nugget than you did. What can be more conclusive on that point than the fact that the memorandum he told you such a consistent story about had no existence ? If a portion of his story be proved false, there is every reasonable presumption that in the case of *such* a story none of it is true. His oblivion of the romance concocted in his sick brain is a proof that he has regained his senses, not that they remain incomplete.”

Daly shook his head with obstinate incredulity. “It won’t do,” he said ; “your theory won’t do. Remember, it is not only the hiding of the nugget, and all the circumstances of the murder, all the occurrences which preceded, accompanied, and followed the shock he received, which he has forgotten ; but the finding of the nugget, the very existence of it, all the circumstances jointly and equally known to us both. To be right, you must account for that.”

“I *think* I can account for it,” returned Deering. “The safety of the nugget was the chief anxiety, the last strong engraving—impression on his mind, an impression sufficiently strong to create the delusion I am satisfied the whole story he told *me* ! you was. Reaction, in such a case as this, would be decisive *and* complete. Oblivion would settle down over the

whole of the matter, if it invaded any portion of it. Perhaps your medical studies have not embraced these subtle subjects? Perhaps you have not had any extensive experience of mental disease or phenomena?"

This suggestion told immensely. There was nothing more opposed to Daly's disposition or practice than pretence of any kind. The assumption of knowledge which he did not possess would have appeared to him simply fraudulent as well as impudent. To so keen an observer as Deering, a man accustomed to every kind of fraudulent assumption, from base coin to spurious reputation, the transparent frankness and gentlemanly quiet of his manner had probably revealed this.

"You are right so far," Daly answered. "I have never studied those branches of medical science, and am quite ignorant on the subject."

"Whereas it is a speciality of mine, if I may lay claim to anything so distinguished as a speciality. I have no doubt whatever that I have made a correct guess in this case. Deuced hard on you, I must say, to have had the gold stolen."

"But how could it have been stolen? The dust was all right. The thieves and murderers had not got in."

"How do you know? You tell me you heard a noise, and rose and went out in the direction of it, and found Clint lying insensible over the murdered man's body. You can only conclude that he too had been roused by a noise. He can give you no information; it is all a blank to him. Don't you think it very likely it was the thief, or thieves, who awoke him; and that it was in pursuit of them, or him, Clint staggered to the door and fell?"

"I never did think of the case in this light before," said Daly. "As it never occurred to me to doubt Clint's story about the nugget, I never had an idea that any robbery had really been committed. But, as you put it, I must say it looks exceedingly probable."

"Does any other solution, considering the memorandum turns out to be a myth, look *at all* probable?" asked Deering

"After all, that is the way to take a thing of this kind. *It must be* explicable, because it has indisputably happened; and the only explanation *I* can discern, consistent with facts, is the one I have just offered. I must say again, it is deuced hard upon you. Clint need not care so much: in the first place, he knows nothing about it; and in the second, if his memory comes back to him on the point of the finding of the nugget, he need not fret, if he has come into the good thing you say by his father's death."

"I almost hope his memory may always remain under *that* cloud, unless indeed, it should presage any further mental disorder." There was a question in his tone, if not in his words, and Deering answered it carelessly, lightly, after a fashion from which the other shrank.

"Oh, never fear; he'll do well enough. A man is none the worse with a hiatus in his brain, if he has a good income, nothing to do, and a wife who believes in him. A country squire can get on as well cracked as whole, I should say."

Daly made no immediate reply; but after they had walked on a little further, he said,—

"If Clint had not been hiding the nugget, how do you account for the cut in his wrist that morning?"

"I don't account for it. What occasion is there for accounting for it? It would be a mere waste of ingenuity, like many of the things one troubles one's head about. You were both in the habit of doing rough and dirty work every day of your lives. How often have you had cut hands, and smears of blood on your sleeves?"

"Often indeed."

"I should think so. That moving incident need not disturb our conclusions."

Daly then told Deering that he had consulted Dr. Drewitt, and what that gentleman's opinion of Walter Clint's case was. "If you are right," he continued, "and there is a growing conviction in my mind that you are right—I have unconsciously misstated the case. It is a much simpler one, as you

put it. It is the cessation of a delusion, and not the existence of one. Dr. Drewitt seemed very much interested about it, and pressed me, as if he really meant it, to communicate with him if there was anything to tell. I think I ought to write to him, place the hypothesis you have just stated before him, and point out that I may have unconsciously misled him,"

"No, no; don't do that," said Deering, with a look at his companion, which was a mingling of a sneer and a scowl. "His interest was merely professional manner, depend upon it. I know old Drewitt—not a bad old fellow, but a regular charlatan: would persuade you your headache was an intimate grief to him, and dissect his best friend with perfect composure. Don't gratify him; he has not a particle of delicacy; you would probably find the correspondence published in a puffing paper or some medical gazette before you were out of the country, with names and dates complete."

Considering that Deering knew nothing whatever of Dr. Drewitt but his name, he had drawn rather audaciously on his fancy in this sketch, which was remarkable for its entire and absolute unlikeness to that very estimable man. But Deering had all his wits about him at all times; and, following up the train of certain considerations which had been occupying his mind during the preceding conversation, very rapidly came the reflection that it was advisable this romantic story of a buried nugget and a lost memory should be known to as few people and as little discussed as possible. He was rather anxious for Daly's reply, but when it came it satisfied him.

"Dr. Drewitt impressed me much more favourably, I must say; but as you know him, I suppose I was mistaken. The publicity of everything in this country would, perhaps, emancipate him from the restraints a man in a similar position at home would feel imposed on him. I will not communicate with him until I get home, at all events. Then, if there is any decided change in Clint, confirmatory of his opinion, I must write to him, according to my promise."

"When do you think of going back to England?"

"I can't say," answered Daly, with a disconcerted, nervous sort of laugh. "It seems odd that the decision of that question should ever have rested with a man so nearly a stranger to me as yourself; and yet it did. The clearest and most decided idea I had in remaining in New York was the hope of finding you, and of recovering the pocket-book. If you had not lost it, we might have done something in the speculative line here, and had the nugget to fall back upon, for I need hardly say I should have expected you to accept an acknowledgment at my hands of so great and important an obligation. But that is all over now."

He lifted his hat, and pushed his thick dark hair off his brow, then ran his fingers through his beard, and threw back his broad shoulders with a gesture familiar to him when he regarded a matter as decided and done with.

By this time they had reached Tremont House. Daly asked Deering to dine with him, but he was not sorry that his invitation was declined. They parted, having made an engagement to meet on the following day; and Daly went into the house, and up to his room, feeling that the events of the day had been rather too much for him. He would need time and solitude to think them out clearly.

Deering, too, sought his much humbler quarters, where he had, however, the facilities he required for leading the kind of life he led of choice. He was hampered by no "respectabilities," checked by no surveillance of decorum or refinement. And among his reflections was this one—whether, if it should prove that there was anything to be made out of Daly—anything, he meant, in the present, apart from the prospective gain, which, with all the means and plans for its acquisition, was already assuming definite shape in his imagination—he would not do well to change his quarters. Daly evidently knew very little of New York, but he was in a fair way of learning. Deering had had an instinctive consciousness that Walter Clint had suspected and distrusted him, but that consciousness had not included Daly, who was much the cleverer

man of the two. But Deering knew the difference between the perceptive powers of a man in illness and a man in health, and gave it its full weight. "A man rarely dislikes his doctor, if he cures him," he thought; and certainly there had been no dislike of him in Daly's manner that day.

"I'll see if I can't make him go away just when it suits me he should do so—no sooner; and no later," Deering said to himself, as he entered a room at once dingy and flashy, whose artistic and literary contents would have furnished the least acute observer with clear indications of his character and pursuits.

He carried a chair across the room, placed it in front of a tall, gaunt press, and standing on it, contrived, with some trouble, to pull down a shabby old valise, which had evidently seen much service, and had been pushed well out of sight against the wall at the top of the press. He flung it on the floor, and turned it over with his foot, to rid it of a portion of the encumbering dust; then placed it on a table, and turned out its motley, valueless contents, until he found the object of his search. He came upon it in a few minutes; and sweeping the valise and all the scattered rubbish down upon the floor, he lighted a gas jet over the stove, locked the door, and set himself to long, serious study of certain closely-written memoranda and roughly-drawn lines, dotted with figures, which occupied two pages of a green leather pocket-book. After his study had lasted some time, he smiled slowly, and muttered,—

"Yes, that will do; perfectly clear and easy, with my recollection of the place. If that fellow hadn't let out the value of this before he asked me for it, he might have done me out of it easily." Then he turned to the written paper again, with the reflection, "There's no such d—d fool as your perfect gentleman."

CHAPTER XXXI.

INFORMATION REQUIRED.

THE loneliness of a great swarming city, where the faces are strange, and one is excluded from the interests which engross every human being one meets; where one might drop out of the concourse, and not be missed for one instant by any living soul, fell heavily on Lawrence Daly. During their short sojourn together in New York, Walter and he had been so much occupied with one another, the imminence of separation after their long and close companionship had never been absent from their thoughts, and they had hardly observed the surrounding scene. But Walter was gone now, and Daly, though not an ungracious, unsociable man, felt very thoroughly alone. He knew the feeling was to some extent voluntary, that when he should really rouse himself to look into his affairs, and take any steps in the direction of business, he should find no lack or difficulty of association; but just yet he did not feel disposed to make the effort. Very seldom in his life before had Lawrence Daly deliberately given way to the indulgence of a weakness, but he did so now, to the indulgence of the weakness of discontent.

He did not envy Walter his lot, in the sense of feeling anything but joyful sympathy with his happiness, and pleasure in his good fortune; but he did feel a great longing for a little of similar sunshine in his own life. The tide had set against him, somehow, just when it turned for Walter, and he murmured against this. There was nowhere in the world a home where he would be welcomed, *in right of himself*; there was *not a woman* in the world the pulses of whose heart could be

stirred by his step, his voice, his smile. Lawrence Daly had now frittered away his feelings in flirtation, and a "grand passion," with its stormy delight and pangs, had never crossed his life. He had never been well enough off in the past to contemplate the possibility of marriage; and this last failure made him think he had better dismiss the idea permanently for the future. It did not much matter, in the abstract form, in which only Daly thought of marriage, but, he thought, rather bitterly, it might have mattered very much. If, instead of the blank life, whose strongest interest was his interest for Walter Clint, his life had been blessed with the love of a woman—a gentle, sweet woman like Florence, or a handsome, brave, impetuous, somewhat ungovernable woman like that golden-eyed Miriam, of whom her brother was so proud and fond—why, then, he would have put this disappointment right away out of sight, and gone to work, to win a home and a provision for her. But, after all, what did it matter to him? It was this very feeling that it did *not* matter which made it hard to bear. Evidently, Lawrence was out of sorts.

Under these circumstances, Deering got the chance of forming a sort of intimacy with him, which, under any other, he would not have succeeded in establishing. He was linked, in a slight but still important manner, with the old life, from which Daly had had no conception it would be so painful to break away; and he was a wanderer, like himself, though, unlike him, no stranger to the ways of New York. They met again and again, and Deering gave Daly some by no means ill-considered or insincere advice concerning the investment of the comparatively small sums at his disposal, on his account and Walter's, with a view to the speediest returns consistent with safety. The intermittent fever of speculation was in one of its hot fits just then in the Empire City, and the only difficulty was that of selecting among the innumerable schemes, of hitherto unequalled brilliancy and extent, by which everybody was to make a fortune. Daly dabbled in one or two of the most reasonable of these, and did well. He was beginning

to like the place, to make friends, to get over the desolation and the desultoriness which had at first beset him. He had heard of Walter's arrival, and of the flourishing state of things in general at The Firs, and, in answer to a cautiously written letter, addressed to Florence, and in which he had requested an answer from her own hand, he had received a report of Walter's health which satisfied him that he was well, but that no reawakening of the memory on the subject on which it had so suddenly and mysteriously sunk into slumber had taken place.

"I have only two faults to find with Walter," Florence wrote, near the end of a pleasant letter, which brought her pretty face and sweet voice back to Lawrence's remembrance with tantalising freshness: "one is that he looks so much older than his years—the other is that he is growing very lazy."

"The fever accounts for the one, and ease and prosperity excuse the other," thought Lawrence. "I wonder how the golden-eyed Miriam gets on." Presently there was a reference to her in Florence's letter:—

"We are still always expecting Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin, and they are still always not coming. He has been ill lately, Walter bids me tell you, with gout, and takes the most violent remedies in order to be able to go out into company. He goes about to all sorts of places with Miriam. I hope they will come to England soon, but I have given up counting upon it. Walter says he has only one thing besides to wish for—that your time was up, and you were safely home at The Firs. And, indeed, dear Mr. Daly, so do I heartily wish this also."

"A good, kind, genuine, womanly letter," said Lawrence to himself, as he folded it up. "It makes a fellow feel less lonely and lost to get such a letter as this. Walter means me to understand that he is confirmed in his notions of the St. Quentin *ménage*, of course. The old gentleman stifles his gout in the interests of his jealousy, no doubt."

Daly had completely adopted Deering's theory of the occur-

rences at the gold-diggings, and had come to regard the loss of the nugget with composure, as he might have regarded any ordinary loss by robbery. As time went on, it did occur to him sometimes to think it strange that he knew so little of Deering, apart from their joint transactions ; how reserved and taciturn the man was in everything which related to his past life, his family relations, or his future prospects ; whereas he had been tolerably expansive in his own communications with Deering. He remembered that Walter Clint had made a remark of the same kind to him one day, and had accompanied it with an expression of dislike to Deering. As for Mr. Deering himself, he found the acquaintance with Daly, to which he had contrived to give the appearance of intimacy, both useful and pleasant, and it was quite remarkable with what curiosity and interest he collected from Daly's conversation every detail which could serve in the construction of the history of his past career. Daly was so much the opposite of an egotistical man, that the collection of these details was not an easy matter ; indeed, it demanded considerable tact, in which Deering sometimes broke down, so that, if Lawrence had not been as little suspicious as he was egotistical, it must have struck him that his friend was strongly actuated by curiosity. But the two qualities combined acted in the interests of Deering's purpose. Daly was not put on his guard by any overweening notion of his own importance, and he never suspected Deering of any ulterior object. Thus it came to pass that, in process of time, Deering had arrived at a knowledge of all the events in Daly's history sufficiently accurate and minute to have served for the compilation of one of those wonderful *dossiers*, which are the terror of French delinquents, and the objects of envy and admiration to French romance-writers.

"You'll excuse my saying so," he remarked to Daly one evening, when they were smoking sociably together on a certain well-known balcony, "but I think you acted rather rashly in respect to the nabob ! You cut the painter there too abruptly and too completely. If you had then had a little

more knowledge of the world, I fancy you would have given him more time, wouldn't you?"

"What for? To keep a promise to a dead woman which he had persistently broken while she lived? Where would have been the sense of that? I should have gained nothing by it, and lost my own self-respect. No, no; notwithstanding the loss of the nugget, I am better off now than I should have been, loafing about, and waiting for the favours of such an uncommonly treacherous and shiftily old providence as Mr. Clibborn."

"I think I understood you, that, in addition to his having married your mother's sister, he is a relative of your own?" There was an unaccountable eagerness in Deering's face as he asked this question, to which Daly replied carelessly,—

"He is a distant relative, but the nearest I have; and I am the nearest he has, I believe."

Then they dropped the subject.

About this time Mr. Deering had an unusual amount of correspondence on hand. Ordinarily, he neither wrote nor received letters which implied anything beyond the business he was engaged in, and the rather low pleasures with which he diversified it. But he had taken to looking out for mail-days of late, and it might have been observed that he was pre-occupied at such times, and additionally attentive to Daly and watchful of him.

Lawrence was not an eager reader of newspapers. A very superficial perusal of the news from Europe sufficed for him, and, if the Atlantic cable had existed in those days, he would probably have dispensed with journalistic literature altogether. He could no more have devoured the contents of the myriad sheets of news and comment, of correspondence and general topics, of novelties and gossip, as the Americans devoured them, than he could have smoked and chewed as they did. Sometimes, when there was news from the Golden State, he *went at it* eagerly enough, feeling about it as he had felt, *when he and Walter were there*, about England, and the old

ways of the forsaken world beyond the two oceans. But in general he was indifferent, and this peculiarity Deering, whom few things escaped, had soon noticed.

There had been no news of interest for some time, and Lawrence was less than ever anxious to know what was in the papers, when one day, at the public dining-table, he heard some people talking of great floods which had done considerable damage in a district of Placer County. There had been, it appeared, great atmospheric disturbance, tremendous rain, and a sudden swelling of the river and its tributary streams. One of the gentlemen present had had a letter containing particulars, and finding Daly interested in the subject, he detailed them. It was strange and pleasant to Lawrence to hear again the names and places he had been so long familiar with. In the evening he read a long and flourishing newspaper version of the occurrence, and sat looking at the words with his thoughts far away, amid the grim desolation of the scene. No lives had been lost, but a good deal of damage had been done by the flood, and Daly would have liked to know how their former claim and the lone hut had fared in the turmoil.

"I wonder whether it is still standing," he thought, "or whether the waters poured into the ravine, tumbled down the face of the old rock there, and swept it away with them. I wonder whether the whole aspect of the place is changed. The lone hut is of too little importance to be mentioned here, I suppose. If Deering is right—and no doubt he is—it does not matter; it never could have mattered, in one way or the other; but if Walter had really buried the gold, [and really had made a memorandum of its whereabouts, it would not have availed now, according to this. These tearing floods efface huge landmarks in a few moments; who can tell how this one may have changed all the features of the small space within which his choice of a hiding-place lay.—There I am, trying back on that old scent again, after all my resolutions, proving to myself, often as I have protested the contrary, how hard it is to recover a downright, knock-down blow of ill-luck.

I ought to be quite over it by this time, especially as I am turning our dust to some purpose, thanks to Deering mainly. He's a clever fellow, and I think a better one than Walter fancied him. The flood did a good deal of damage in Cobb's Valley, I see : I wonder if it swept over the burying-ground, and tore up the headstones ; in that case poor Spoiled Five's wooden cross—the memorial of him to a whole race of strangers—is gone too."

Lawrence and Deering had a good deal of business in common just then, and when they met next day, they began to discuss it at once, and no mention was made of the news of the great flood in the Golden State. Daly thought of it afterwards, and was glad he had not talked about it.

"I am determined I will not," he thought ; "it would only tempt me into talking of that unlucky nugget to Deering again, and I am determined henceforth it shall rest."

And so a word that might have availed much, remained by the decree of fate unspoken.

Mr. Deering had been deeply engaged with his correspondence before he went to his appointment with Lawrence on the day in question. It was not voluminous, and it was not various, but it was exceedingly engrossing, and Deering had apparently reached a puzzling stage in it. He walked moodily about a room, very different in its decorations from that which he had abandoned, after prudential calculation, cogitating intently, and turning his eyes from time to time upon the large paper-strewn table at which he had been sitting.

"It is too soon," he muttered—"too soon to tell him, to induce him to go to England. There is a good deal to be done with him here yet, and the other thing will keep—will be all the better for keeping, indeed—until I have made all there is to be made here out of his resources and my own. The prize is safe enough ; it will not slip away, but this opportunity might. No, he must not know : he must not go yet ; it *is too soon*. If the time had come, I wonder whether he ~~would~~ go and put in his claim, or be magnanimous and re-

nounce it. He is fool enough for anything of that kind, and that would be a stopper. Let me see."

He halted beside the table, and took up a large sheet of foolscap, on which certain slips cut from newspapers, in different kinds of type, and varying in length, were pasted. He was perfectly familiar with them, and yet he read them over slowly and half aloud. A thin slip, containing merely the name of the newspaper from which it was extracted, and the date of its issue, was pasted half an inch above each of these paragraphs :—

The "Times," Wednesday, July —, 186—.

"INFORMATION REQUIRED.—Any person who can give information respecting Lawrence Daly, who left England, in 186—, for New York, it is supposed, with the intention of proceeding to the Far West, will be handsomely rewarded on communicating with Monsieur Caux, Rue de la Flèche, Paris."

The "Times," Monday, August —, 186—.

"Lawrence Daly, who left England in 186—, is earnestly requested to communicate with his nearest relative. He will find compliance with this request very much to his advantage, Address, L. C., care of Monsieur Caux, Rue de la Flèche, Paris."

"New York Herald," September —, 186—.

"Information concerning the whereabouts, or, if he be not living, the death of Mr. Lawrence Daly, supposed to have been in the city of New York, in the Summer of 186—, is earnestly requested, and will be handsomely paid for by Monsieur Caux, Rue de la Flèche, Paris."

"New York Sentinel," September —, 186—.

"L. D.—If you will let me know where you are, you shall not regret it. My promise to 'Aunt Kate' shall be yet fulfilled. Let bygones be bygones, and write at once to me, under cover to Monsieur Caux, Rue de la Flèche, Paris."

"A clever calculator, no doubt, could tell exactly how many to one the chances ought to have been in favour of Daly's

seeing all these, and of my *not* seeing the first of them. But calculation is gravely out sometimes. If I had seen the second and not the third, it would have made a considerable difference to me. A hundred pounds when I place Monsieur Caux and Lawrence Daly in direct communication, and the strictest secrecy observed concerning the date of my reply to the advertisement. After all, was it weak of me to stipulate for that? When I have got all the money there's to be had out of Daly's dear repentant relative over there, and all the money there's to be had out of Daly himself here, what does it matter to me what he thinks of me, especially as I hope he will have before long been my unconscious benefactor to an extent of which we are at this moment both in ignorance. The pear is getting ripe; it will soon be time to shake the tree, but not yet. The repentant relative must suffer a little more remorse and suspense first, until we see what's coming of *Ontarios*, at all events."

He huddled up the scattered papers, and locked them into a drawer. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he stood for a moment with his hand on the key.

"It's cutting it rather close, this delay. Just suppose Walter Clint should see the advertisement in the *Times*, and volunteer the required information! By Jove! that would be a crooked turn of my luck. However, one must risk something, and I don't risk *money*. But there's not much time to spare now."

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN OLD MAN'S DARLING.

IN a vast and splendid apartment on the *rez-de-chaussée* of a fine hotel in Paris, belonging, not to the extravagant latter days of the Second Empire, but to its more solid middle period, we find Miriam St. Quentin, a year after her father's death. How much resemblance does she bear to the handsome school-girl, who, hardly five years ago, looked at her bright young face in the glass before she ran down-stairs to take her first independent step in life—the selection of a waiting-maid? How much, in mind or person? What marks has time set upon her face and upon her heart, in that progression to which standing still is as impossible as it is to the waves of the sea?

It was the early winter-time, and the air was clear, bright, and crisply cold. Miriam was in her boudoir—a large room, with a richly-furnished conservatory at one end, where there was a crystal fountain with an alabaster basin, wherein gold and silver fish disported themselves, and an aviary tenanted by bright-winged birds; where there was a background of strange tropical growths and feathery frondage, from which banks of gorgeous blossoms, and velvet leaves, with cunningly disposed lights dispersed among them, sloped downward, and surrounded the fountain in semicircular form, with an interval of marble mosaic. The air was warm and perfumed; the feathery rain of the fountain mingled its sound with the cooing voices of the doves nestling behind the silver wires of their cage; beyond the silken curtains lay the boudoir, in which every modern luxury was accumulated for the pleasure of its owner. Things at once beautiful and precious met the eye

on every side, and on all was set the impress of supreme good taste, in harmony of colour, of design, of arrangement. A wood fire burned upon the wide hearth, and a glass screen framed in an ivy wreath of malachite stood between it and the low chair in which Miriam was sitting. She was leaning forward, her eyes fixed apparently upon the rose-coloured reflection of the flame in the sheet of crystal, her hands clasped round her knees. Miriam had not yet laid aside her mourning; her rich, plain dress was black, and its soft thick folds well became her full, dignified figure. Five years ago Miriam Clint had been a handsome girl, to whom probably no one would have applied the much misused term "beautiful." Now she might have claimed the epithet, fairly, in most of the positions and expressions of her face and form. The consummate ease and tranquillity, the assured self-possession, the habit of being implicitly obeyed, the entire and placid consciousness of importance to which all self-assertion is superfluous, of a thoroughly prosperous and well-trained woman of the world, were all discernible in Miriam St. Quentin. A hasty, ungraceful movement, a loud tone, a vehement expression, a *gaucherie* of any kind, would have been as impossible to her as if she had been born and reared in that calm world of impassive greatness and social importance wherein such things have to the vulgar eye no existence. Clever and resolute as she was, when she had made her bargain with the future she had determined that not only would she have all the good things of this life with which her marriage could provide her, but that she would get out of them the very most they could be made to yield. And so she studied, not only what the women of the great world—who had wealth, luxury, taste, and freedom—enjoyed, but after what fashion they enjoyed them. She had a great deal more ability than most of them, and, at this time of her life, quite as little heart as any, and she learnt the ways of them and of their world with much readiness and completeness. Composed, proud, exquisite *in tact and manner*, Miriam was now a beautiful woman, whom

all "society" everywhere admitted to be "perfectly charming," and who had not an intimate friend in the world except Florence, whom she had not seen for ten months.

The touch of time, while it had improved her actual beauty, added refinement to the features which had no classical regularity, touched the broad temples with finer lines of thought and knowledge, deepened the searching glances of the glorious golden eyes, and set a mark of will and decision upon the soft, full, delicately-tinted lids, had told upon her too. Miriam had nothing girlish left about her looks. She was a woman in the full bloom and strength and pride of her beauty, but a woman who looked every hour of her years, who was as completely, though not so widely, separated from girlhood as from age.

She sat still, gazing on the little sparkles of flame reflected in the sheet of crystal. The streak of colour beneath her eyelids was as delicate as ever; but it had deepened to-day into a rosy flush, and there was a sparkle in the fixed eyes which might have told an observer that Miriam's mind was not so idle as her hands.

The velvet table by her side was heaped with books; books in English bindings, *brochures* in their paper covers; a salverful of cards and unopened notes vainly asked for her attention—she heeded none of them. Presently, disturbed, it seemed, by the chiming of a timepiece, she rose, and walked slowly into the conservatory, pausing before the aviary, and idly watching the fluttering of the birds.

"What does it mean?" she muttered; "what does it mean? I think and think; I turn in my mind every particle of knowledge I have managed to acquire respecting the past; I watch him closely; and yet *I know* there is something going on that I cannot fathom. The alteration in his manner, everything, confirms me in this belief. He has almost ceased to watch me. Why? There never was any cause, except in his own suspicious mind and depraved imagination. But whence the change?"

She beckoned to the birds, and put her fingers through the

bars of the cage. The bright-winged creatures came and pecked at them, nibbling the rosy finger-tips, and fluttering with joy. She presented a perfect picture of happiness, beauty, leisure, and luxury in the framework of that beautiful scene; and yet she was troubled, uncertain, nervous, afraid. No trace of any of those feelings was to be found in her composed mien or on her beautiful face, but she knew they were there, and she was doing battle with them by the aid of reason, and getting worsted, for they had their origin chiefly in impressions which defied her judgment.

"I must and will find out what he is doing," so ran her thoughts. "Bianca does not know, poor ignorant wretch; she is only fit for the post of spy, not for the position of confidante. His skilful stroke of tyranny, as he thought it, in forcing me to keep her in my service, has been a consummate failure. As if *she* could have hindered me from doing anything I chose to do, or discovered anything I chose to hide!" A faint disdainful smile crossed Miriam's lips, and in the same instant she chirruped to the birds, and smoothed a ringdove's sleek head with her fair fingers. "Who is this man who calls here so frequently, and has long conferences with him in his study, and what are these papers he is perpetually brooding over? Can he be meditating treachery towards me? His relaxed vigilance and his increased gentleness are quite enough to set any one who knows him so thoroughly as I do, on the alert. My mind is so full of this, I can think of nothing else. It makes me forget even Florence and Walter. And I cannot tell her, I cannot trouble her peace and joy, after her long trial. And, besides, what is there to tell? It is all suspicion; there are no facts to lay hold of, or facts so few and so slight that I could not so place them before her as to give them the weight *I know* they have."

She sighed, and raising her hands higher on the wires of the cage, leaned her forehead against them, and so stood for many minutes profoundly still. From this attitude the *entrance* of a servant, to announce that her carriage waited,

roused her, and she returned to the fireside in the boudoir, opened the notes which lay on the table, glanced over them, threw them into the fireplace, and slowly left the room.

A splendid carriage, turned out in the best possible style, with superb bay horses, and servants in long coats and valuable furs, was drawn up under the wide glazed portico. Presently Miriam appeared at the top of the short flight of steps, where orange-trees stood in majolica tubs on either side. She was ceremoniously escorted by Mr. St. Quentin, who handed her into the carriage with a polite and audible expression of his regret that he did not feel sufficiently well to accompany her in her drive. The carriage turned out of the great echoing gateway, and Miriam was thinking, "What a pleasant drive I shall have! only I wish I knew what it is that has made him change his tactics so completely. The result is so pleasant and welcome, I wish I could be satisfied there is no danger in the cause."

How has time dealt with Mr. St. Quentin since that remarkably well-preserved gentleman has been in possession of the choicest blessings of existence—a large fortune, freedom to enjoy it according to his own tastes, perfect leisure, and a beautiful young wife? It is a little more than five years since he returned to England, and he has no cause to complain of any undue havoc in his well-cared-for personal appearance. Perhaps no one would be likely to guess his present age so far short of the truth as almost every one had guessed it five years previously. But he was not, even yet, irrevocably in the category of "old men." Partial friends and toadies might still designate him an "elderly gentleman," and strangers be introduced to him and Miriam without having their sense of incongruity quickened into actual disgust. His figure was still upright and active, and his hair plentiful, though grizzled. His correct, tasteful, appropriate style of dress, entirely free from affectation of youthfulness, was also as free from carelessness, and he was altogether a "personable" man. Very close observers, familiar with Mr. St. Quentin's appearance at the

period of his return from India, might have noticed that he did not look so amiable, so ready and easy to be pleased, as in those days ; that he was more silent, and seemed at times to have "something on his mind," of a nature inconsistent with the general prosperity of his condition.

There was not the least suspicion afloat among the society in which Miriam and her husband lived that their marriage was not a happy one—happy, that is to say, in modern society's sense of that word. They were not supposed to be romantically attached, but that kind of thing was never thought of among well-bred people, even when no discrepancy of age existed. Mere vulgar honest love did very well to cheer the existence of the lower classes ; but it did not count in the fine, gay, luxurious, great world, in which there is not the least occasion for two persons to bore each other, if they happen to disagree, or to have had enough of one another, or severally to prefer somebody else, and where all these contingencies may be provided for with perfect decorum. It was allowed, on the other hand, that the reciprocal demeanour of Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin was simply perfect. On his side, alertness, attention, well-bred gallantry ; on hers, consideration, frank kindliness, with just the slightest touch of that delightful deference to his age, which was so very charming. The *aplomb*, and the perfect freedom of a wife, combined with something gently respectful, which caused every one to remember that she was young enough to be his daughter. There appeared to be a wonderful accord in their tastes. That Miriam should enjoy society, and should be seen wheresoever the fashionable world gathered itself together, was of course quite natural ; but Mr. St. Quentin was in this, as in every other respect, a model husband. He went everywhere with Miriam, and he seemed to like it. He had nothing of the henpecked husband. Then, her dress was superb, and her jewels enough to make angels envious ; there was nothing in *Paris* better than her equipage ; of a surety, Mrs. St. Quentin was a fortunate woman.

Mr. St. Quentin belonged to a *cerde*, where he played occasionally, decorously. He rode a fine horse, sitting well, and looking less than his age in the saddle. No one could accuse him of a deficiency in the virtue of hospitality; in that respect he subscribed implicitly to the laws of society, and took care never to be on the debtor's side; but yet he was not popular, as his wife was in a superficial way. His was a cold and selfish nature, and this truth—which more surely than all besides alienates affection and friendship—was understood and felt, so that Mr. St. Quentin had no friends. His real relations with Miriam were known to themselves alone; even Bianca's acquaintance with them was superficial, and though she regarded them with all the coarse misconception of a mind at once vicious and ignorant, she was in reality far from estimating aright their deadly discord and animosity. Of late Miriam's letters to her sister-in-law had contained no lively allusions to Mr. St. Quentin's ridiculous jealousy, no mischievous record of her perverse playing upon this dangerous weakness. Florence observed the omission with thankfulness, but she was wise enough to make no comment upon it.

"Dear Miriam has found out her error, and she is repairing it. Everything is right between them, and nothing is now wanting to my happiness," thought Florence, in her simple way: she to whom to discover a fault in her own conduct, and to confess and rectify it, were natural and simultaneous operations of the conscience and the will. "I thought he could hardly fail to appreciate her thoroughly, when once he had gotten the better of his besetting sin and folly." It never occurred to Florence that there are people who cherish their besetting sins, even when they know them perfectly, and make idols of their leading follies.

Miriam's change of tone was in reality due to a very different cause. The matter had become too serious for jesting and had developed features concerning which she could not consult Florence. There were times when she seriously believed Mr. St. Quentin to be mad, or nearly so, and a deeply-

rooted uneasiness had taken possession of her mind. Their private relations were as bad and unnatural as their demeanour in public, though without any mutual arrangement or understanding, was faultless. Each could trust the pride of the other on this point thoroughly. At home they rarely met. There was no more interference with Miriam, no curious inquiries into her correspondence, no spying out of her ways. But this change did not reassure Miriam, though it relieved her. Mr. St. Quentin's presence had become disagreeable to her; her liking for him had died away before the contempt with which he had inspired her. It would have been too much to expect a girl like Miriam to be logical; too much to expect that she would have recognized the reasonableness with which a man may conclude that a woman whom he knows he has bought is not to be trusted. It was only too true that she had come to hate him; but she had hated him with less bitterness and consistency when he worried her and insulted her by his suspicions, bored her mercilessly with his company and his flattery, than now, when he was perfectly polite, distant, and estranged. It made Miriam desperately angry with herself to know that she was afraid of him. She had almost pitied the old man at times, when, in his absurd jealousy and determination to watch her, he had run serious risks rather than allow her to go out without him, and yet had scornfully refused her offer to relinquish her engagements and remain at home. But now all was changed. She had no more pity for him, but serious apprehension for herself. She had unfettered liberty of action, and yet she had never felt less free. Something she was ignorant of was in the atmosphere of her life, and to natures like hers only the unknown is terrible.

Mr. St. Quentin had never mentioned Walter Clint's name to Miriam since they had left England. When she learned that her brother had returned to The Firs, she told Mr. St. Quentin the fact. He replied that he wished to know nothing whatever about Mr. Walter Clint, and that he forbade any *further mention of him or his wife—the one was a systematic*

liar, the other an adventuress. It was after this that he relinquished the former system of spying upon her, and their domestic life underwent a complete alteration.

But though Mr. St. Quentin kept aloof from her, and intruded no more upon her occupations—thus depriving her of the means of knowing how his own time was passed—Miriam became aware, by various little indications, that some matter was of interest to him which had formerly not existed. Mr. St. Quentin's "business" had been conducted with much simplicity and celerity, and had chiefly consisted in the signing of cheques. Miriam knew that his money was principally invested in Indian securities, but that he always had a large sum on deposit at the Bank of France. He was in the habit of receiving a few letters from India occasionally, but he carried on no active business transactions now with that country, and Miriam was aware that his fortune was growing. He was a more wealthy man than when she had found in his wealth a way of escape.

Perhaps it was money-making, speculation of some sort, which was engrossing him now. Avarice, said to be the favourite vice of age, was laying its hold on him perhaps, and that of other and lesser passions was loosened. If so, it was avarice without its customary exterior. He did not save money because he was making it. He was ostentatiously profuse in his expenditure, and Miriam had more and more luxury in her life, and the command of much larger sums, every shilling of which she expended recklessly, than formerly. In her extravagance he never checked her. Her love of luxury and adornment he seemed to regard with pleasure, not easily to be reconciled with his indifference to herself, and the silent, rigid estrangement which he was apparently determined to maintain. Every wish, every fancy of hers, was punctiliously gratified by him, when such wishes or fancies lay outside the limits of her individual control. Only in the one particular of going to England, and thus having an opportunity of seeing her brother, *did Miriam feel herself powerless*; and Florence's silence on

the point made her understand that she and Walter knew the truth. It was therefore with surprise, not unmixed with uneasiness, that Miriam, one evening about this time, heard her husband speak to a lady, at a dinner-party at their own house, of the probability of their being in England at Christmas. The lady expressed her sentiments of congratulation at this prospect of participation in the "so-English pleasures" of the season, and went chattering on about all that English people are supposed to do and to feel at that extremely unpleasant time of the year. Mr. St. Quentin listened, and explained courteously; but Miriam was perfectly aware that he was watching her, and highly as she resented his having taken this means of informing her of his intentions, she preserved an appearance of perfect unconcern. Next day, she said to her husband,—

"Do you intend that we shall go to England this winter?"

"I do," he replied. "You heard me say so last night, I think?"

"Do you mean to remain there any time?"

"That will entirely depend on circumstances. I am going to England for a special purpose, and my movements will be regulated accordingly."

"Am I to be informed of this special purpose?"

"You are not. It is no affair of yours."

Miriam glanced at him with a contemptuous smile, and bent her head.

"I wish to give you fair notice," she continued, "that when we go to England it is my intention to see my brother. I am entirely resolved on this point. Nothing will make me alter my resolution."

"You can see your brother and whom you please, when we go to England," said Mr. St. Quentin. And with that their interview came to an end.

Miriam was confounded by this turn of affairs; but she *maintained* her composure, and bravely hid the smarting wound *to her pride*. This had occurred several days ago, and Miriam

had not received any intimation from Mr. St. Quentin of the time at which he intended to leave Paris. She sickened with anger at being obliged to endure this sort of thing from the old man with whom she had intended to have her own way so completely, but no human being ever saw a look or heard a word expressive of her disgust.

On this day, when her carriage had driven away, Mr. St. Quentin went direct to her boudoir, and having closed the door, stood with his back against it, deliberately surveying every detail of its luxurious adornment. A bad, cynical smile, accompanied the slow travelling of his eyes from point to point. Then he walked across the spacious room to the silk-curtained archway which formed the entrance to the conservatory, where the fountain was showering down its tinkling rain, and Miriam's birds were fluttering behind the silver wires. From this point he again surveyed the room, and now he laughed a low, evil laugh.

"She likes all this," he muttered. "What taste she has!—and what a love of luxury and ease! She shall have it, plenty of it, as much as she likes, *for awhile*. No fear of her giving *this* up; no fear of her running away from *this*; no fear of her giving up money, even for *love*."

His well-preserved, good-looking old face was a sight to see for vindictiveness and cunning. He smoothed it and his grey hair all over with his hand before he left the room, and went to keep an appointment with a person who had visited him occasionally of late, and whose visits formed an item in the list of Miriam's anxious misgivings.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

REVOLT.

WHEN Miriam returned from her drive, she asked of the footman in attendance in the hall, who had called during her absence. The footman mentioned only one name, but it gave Miriam something to think of.

Mrs. St. Quentin received that evening, and did so with a grace which would have surprised her friends at Drington, and filled Miss Monitor with amazement. Deportment and manners of that style never came out of any London school, but were the result of Miriam's steady application of her keen intelligence with a fixed purpose. She was as elegant and refined a woman as she was handsome ; and her social success was perfect. It would be a great mistake to suppose that Miriam was positively unhappy because her management of Mr. St. Quentin had not proved so skilful and successful as she had intended it to be, or that she experienced any of the forlorn dreariness in the midst of all the good things of this world, which comes to those who have, "instead of fruit, chewed bitter ashes." She was uneasy now, and vaguely apprehensive, but she enjoyed her life for all that, and had not the remotest notion that there might, in one moment, arise for her a spectre in her path, which must turn all this gold-bedecked existence of hers into aching bitterness and regret, and that the spectre's name was Love. Long after, Miriam knew how merciful fate had been to her, and what tremendous temptation and danger had been spared her, in the days when she really believed in money, and *never thought about love.*

The reception had nearly come to an end, and Miriam,

looking superbly handsome, was standing in the centre of the *salon*, surrounded by a group of talkers, about to disperse. The subject under discussion was handwriting, and an English lady had just remarked that the handwriting of all French people seemed alike to her ; she could not believe in the truth of a pretension to the discernment of character from it ; though it might be possible in the case of English caligraphy.

"That is only because you are not accustomed to French writing, Mrs. Denison," said Miriam. "It is just in the same way that so many faces look the same to one, seen in a crowd, and yet, examined in detail, are all different. French people call our style 'English writing,' just as distinctively as we call theirs 'French.'"

"It makes no difference to me," said the lady whose talent in the divination of character from handwriting had given rise to the conversation, "to what nation the writer belongs, nor whether I can read the words. The truth is, I can only read two languages—my own (French) and Spanish. I do not understand a word of English or German, and yet I have frequently been singularly correct in my interpretation of character from handwritings in both these languages."

Miriam was politely interested. A whimsical idea struck her, and an amused smile played upon her lips. She had in her possession a letter, written by the hand of one person at the dictation of another. If there really was anything in the pretensions of this quasi-science, here would be a good opportunity of testing it. Could the mere formation of words on paper, with pen and ink, unguided, uninspired by the actual writer, emanating from the mind and intention of another person, convey to the diviner any impression of the character of an individual who had acted in a merely mechanical capacity ? Or would the absence of meaning, *to the writer*, render the handwriting all blank and meaningless to the diviner ? If the latter should prove to be the case, Miriam would feel there was more in this pretension than any amount of description, that might partake, more or less, of happy accident, could induce

her to believe. She immediately expressed much interest and curiosity respecting the strange faculty of Madame de la Salle, and an eager desire to see it exercised. But Madame de la Salle did her divination seriously, and explained that she always required to be quite alone and undisturbed when she applied herself to the practice of her art. So the envelopes and half-sheets of letters which had begun to emerge from the pockets of some of the members of the group surrounding Miriam retired into obscurity again, and the subject dropped. But presently Miriam drew Madame de la Salle aside, just within the drapery of the arch which divided the *salon* from her boudoir, as the boudoir was divided from the conservatory, and asked her if she might send her a sample of handwriting on which to test her skill. Madame de la Salle would be delighted.

"It is a letter, written in English," said Miriam.

"So much the better; it is all the more convincing, if I succeed. If I shall send you a good description of your correspondent; hold—do not tell me who it is, or whether you care at all for the writer, or not—taken from writing of which I cannot understand a word, you will not think any longer I am what you call—it is your grand English word, I *do* know that much, for everything you do not comprehend—a *omebog*."

Miriam laughed, and assured Madame de la Salle she should put the most absolute faith in her report. "I wonder," she thought, "whether it will bear any affinity to the description of Daly, I had from Florence, and which Walter had supplemented once or twice." It was arranged that she should send the letter to Madame de la Salle on the following day, and the lady retired. Shortly afterwards, Miriam being alone, and the impression made by this little incident remaining on her mind, she thought she would put the letter in an envelope at once, ready to be sent to Madame de la Salle in the morning. A slight incident, destined to have a considerable result.

A cabinet of ebony and silver, with grotesque handles, formed one of the ornaments of Miriam's boudoir, and was the recep-

tacle of the few letters she considered worth preserving. She seated herself in front of this cabinet, and opened the lock—which was of a cunning device, and formed the orifice of the mouth of a grinning dragon—with a silver key attached to her watch-chain. The opened doors, lined with fine inlaid-work, of the same precious materials, but of more minute pattern than the exterior, disclosed a row of shallow drawers, whose locks, miniatures in their ornaments of the master-lock, were subject to the same key. Miriam had no distinct recollection of the drawer in which she had put away the letter she was searching for, so she began to pull them out, one after another, leisurely, commencing from the top, and lingering, as one is apt to do, over a search of the kind, opening letters for which one is not looking, turning over forgotten odds and ends, and letting one's mind yield to the old associations revived by such things.

The letter which Miriam was looking for was not in the top drawer, nor in the second. She lingered a long time over the third. It contained a medley of papers and trifles—small trinkets which Miriam had worn in her girlhood, but which were far too valueless and insignificant for Mrs. St. Quentin. A dreadful cornelian brooch, given her by Charley Boscombe, and for which she had been forced to invent an imaginary origin, was among them. She took it out, and looked at it smiling. “Just imagine my ever having thought that thing beautiful,” she said to herself; “and actually telling the most abominable lies that I might be allowed to wear it! And the lies were all for its own sake, too, not for Charley Boscombe's. I never cared a straw about him. I wonder what has become of him? There, it may stay in its corner.” And so she put the brooch back, and went on with her search among the papers. But the letter was not in the third drawer. It was the same thing with the others. And at last Miriam sat before the cabinet, the lower drawer of the row open before her, its late contents in her lap, and her hands hanging idly down. The letter was not there! Miriam did not keep papers, except her bills, which were all in her writing-table, with her cheque-

book and her household documents, in any other place ; she had no papers but these. Either the letter she was searching for was in that cabinet, or it was lost. She had received the letter in question in Mr. St. Quentin's presence ; and, after reading a few lines, she had left the room, and finished the perusal in her bedroom, with locked doors. She had cried over the letter, she remembered, and Mr. St. Quentin had watched her all the remainder of the day with unbearable pertinacity ; and had—*apropos* of the remark that her eyes looked as if she had been crying, and that their beauty was not enhanced by the circumstance—asked her from whom this letter came.

" From my brother. You have bidden me not to mention him. Why do you oblige me to do so ? " she had replied, angrily.

Mr. St. Quentin had answered never a word.

Miriam further remembered that she had carried this letter about with her for some days, in its envelope, which had been addressed to her by Florence, and posted at Drington. She remembered the date. The letter ought, if she had put it away with her accustomed regularity, to be in the packet contained in the last drawer but one. She had sorted the whole of that packet—some of its contents were in envelopes, some were not. Again she went over them, carefully ; and there was Florence's envelope, containing *a blank sheet of paper*. Then it flashed across her memory that, some days after the receipt of the letter, she had ordered Bianca to bring it to her, with the other things then in the pocket of a morning-gown she had just taken off, and had added it to the packet in the drawer of the cabinet, without opening the envelope.

It took Miriam a good deal of time to recall these small incidents, and to make herself perfectly certain about them. But when she had the circumstances before her, the explanation of them came with a flash. Her face turned pale and rigid, and she drew one deep breath. Then she rose, slowly replaced *all the contents* of the cabinet, closed and locked its doors, and *left the room*.

Mr. St. Quentin's rooms were on the opposite side of the vestibule. Miriam knocked at the door of the dressing-room, which was opened by her husband's valet, who looked considerably astonished at beholding her. Mr. St. Quentin, in a superb dressing-gown, was sitting by the fire, reading, and the wax-lights shone on a toilet apparatus to the full as luxurious as Miriam's. Mr. St. Quentin looked up from his book, as much surprised as the man, to whom Miriam said :—

"You may go. I wish to speak to Mr. St. Quentin."

The valet obeyed. Miriam walked up to the fireplace, laid her arm upon the mantelpiece, and, looking down at her husband with a frown on her face, said :—

"You employed Bianca to steal a letter from me several months ago. I did not find it out until to-night. Where is that letter?"

Mr. St. Quentin shut his book, and flung it on the floor.

"What do you mean?" he began.

Miriam's fingers tapped the velvet-covered slab, as she said,—

"You had better give me back that letter, and explain your conduct. You don't like scandals, you know, and you prize the good opinion of the world. So do I, in a measure, but not beyond measure; not enough, for instance, to be induced to live in this house an hour beyond to-morrow, unless you give me back that letter."

"Are you mad?—are you mad?"

"Not in the least; but I think you must have been when you ventured on treating *me* after such a fashion. Come, Mr. St. Quentin"—her fingers tapped the velvet slab anew—"give me the letter which Bianca stole from me by your orders."

Mr. St. Quentin looked very old and very ugly as he answered her, glancing obliquely at her handsome figure and scornful, pale face.

"You deceived me; you lied to me about that, as you have deceived and lied to me a hundred times before. It was my right to find out your disgraceful deceit by every means in my power."

"Even by bribing an ignorant servant to act as your spy."

I am edified by your morality, but I am not going to discuss it. Nor am I about to endeavour to disabuse your mind of the monstrous delusion under which you labour. It is not worth my while. I merely require the restoration of my brother's letter."

"Your *brother's* letter!—you impudent, lying jade! How dare you venture to try such a barefaced imposture upon me! I know enough about your *brother's* letters—when your lover wrote to you under the convenient cover of your brother's wife's masquerade in my house! How *dare* you tell me *this* lie now!"

He was almost inarticulate with rage. Miriam had started, as if he had struck her, at his words of coarse abuse—the first he had ever used to her—but she let him go on.

"Your brother's letter! You must have forgotten it, or you would not venture on so clumsy a cheat as this. But you have gone too far, madam, much too far. The *rôle* of the complaisant husband does not suit me any longer, as you will find. I will yet discover who the man is for whom you have deceived me from the first, and defeat all your calculations."

Miriam looked at him with quite unaffected wonder. Her anger had almost passed away in amazement and contempt. So had her vague fear of him. This was beyond bearing, and she did not mean to bear it.

"I have not deceived you," she said calmly. "You have deceived yourself. You are the victim of senseless jealousy and contemptible suspicion. There is not, there never was, any man in the case. I confess I have sometimes amused myself by making you think there was, and thus befooling you and your spy. I am sorry for it; I did it, quite unconscious of the depth and seriousness of the canker in your unhappy mind. You have no right to insult me, though I did marry you without love for you. It was a fair bargain. I did not deceive you then—I have not deceived you since. Your mad and foolish jealousy first displayed itself about my brother. It was proved to you, beyond even your power to dispute, that the confidence and the correspondence you then resented were about and

with him only. That might have satisfied you, I think, and cured you of your folly. Do you think, because I am your wife, and ought never to have become so, I have no self-respect on *any* subject? Do you think I have no conscience to hear and to obey?"

"I think you are a liar," he answered her brutally. "I think you are lying now, as you lied then, you and your confederate. I have the worst opinion of you, as I have of your brother, and I would not believe either of you on your oath. You think you can deceive me now, but you are mistaken. You think I have no means of convicting you. But I have a specimen of your brother's handwriting in my possession, and if the shameful contents of the letter which you claim, and which you shall not have, were not sufficient to convict you of so gross and impudent a fable, the writing would do so. It is not your brother's."

"I know that. Give me back the letter."

She had removed her arm from the mantelpiece, and was now standing before him, her hands by her sides, twisted in the folds of her gown, as though she were trying to keep down a gust of passionate anger.

"I will not." He rose, pushed back his chair, and confronted her. A horrid sight, with his grey hair and anger-flushed old face.

"Is this a final reply, Mr. St. Quentin?"

"It is. I will never give you that letter."

"Then I will never give *you* an explanation of it. Think what you will about it, inflict as much torture upon yourself by means of it as the ingenuity of jealousy and suspicion can suggest. I hope these resources may prove fertile. Never, from this hour until that of your death or mine, will I tell you the truth, or any part of it, concerning that letter; and I will never pardon your conduct to me to-night. You have spoken words to me which I know you have often wished to speak, but you did not dare. You have overcome that scruple, and so much the worse for you!"

She turned her back upon him, as he remembered she had

done on the occasion of their first quarrel, when she had torn up the letter, and flung it out of the window, and had her hand on the lock of the door before he said: "Stay; what do you mean?"

"You shall know to-morrow."

She found Mr. St. Quentin's valet in the ante-room, and sent him to his master, then went to her own room, where Bianca sat yawning and sulky. Miriam gave the woman one look, which had a surprising effect. She started, and asked her mistress, timidly, what had happened.

"Nothing that you need know," was the answer. "I have found you out to be a thief; I have always known you to be a spy. You—you will leave my house to-morrow, and my room this moment." She held the door open with one hand, and pointed to it with the other. Cowed by the disdainful anger in her eyes Bianca left the room without a word.

Miriam locked the door, and sitting down at her toilet-table began to take the pins out of her hair.

"So it has come to this"—thus ran her thoughts—"that I must give it all up. There is a price which even I, who have not learned to think less about it, but more, cannot consent to pay for wealth. I shall return to The Firs; Walter and Florence will receive me gladly, I know, and they will never reproach me. After what he has said to-night, the sight of this hateful old man will be for ever intolerable to me. I could not endure it, for all he has to give. I have indeed realized all Florence's misgivings; but even she, when she hears this, will say I have done well. What was it he called me, this accomplished gentleman, whose manner to his wife is so perfect in society—'an impudent, lying jade,' was it not? I don't think my father ever called me that, or thought it of me, in his worst temper. Mr. St. Quentin shall not say those words to me twice, nor any words like them, ever again. It is hard to have to own myself beaten; but there are harder *things* than that, and I can but choose the least hard. I will *write* to Walter to-morrow, and tell him to come and take me *away*, and I know he will do it. More than that, I know

he will never reproach me with the unlucky ending of my great speculation.

“What were the words of the letter Mr. Daly wrote for him? I hope they were sufficiently ambiguous to confirm Mr. St. Quentin in his belief in their origin, if he has set to work to read them, in order to nourish his wrath, the moment I left him. There was a grateful reference to my fidelity to the promise I had given him, during the time which had seemed so unendurably long; an assurance of the unchanging love which he cherished for me; a reference to the time when neither of us had any consolation but the other; and then he said that, though all the circumstances were so entirely changed, he and I should always be the same, and that I should be rewarded for my truth to him. Yes, I think that was all; and there was no signature, and the letter began with ‘My own dear Miriam.’ No doubt it has made Mr. St. Quentin uncomfortable; and if this occurrence did not make me quite certain that the old man’s ruling passion is hopeless of cure, and must continue to beset my life in a way which, for the insult and the living lie of it, would be quite intolerable—I should be a fool to throw up my cards at this stage of the game. But I know myself, and I can’t stand any more.”

Miriam slept soundly, notwithstanding her discomfiture, and awoke at the usual hour next morning with her mind unaltered.

She dressed herself without assistance, and then rang for Bianca, who came to her pale and silent. She paid the woman her wages, added a gift for travelling expenses, if she chose to return to her country, and dismissed her. The thing was done in five minutes, and Bianca never ventured a remonstrance, or named Mr. St. Quentin.

In a few minutes after Bianca had left her the valet came to tell her that Mr. St. Quentin had been very ill all night, and was then in the agonies of a severe fit of gout. At that moment a doctor was with him.

The attack proved to be a serious one, and Miriam’s object was indefinitely postponed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CRISIS.

THE crowd of people who find some unaccountable sort of pleasure, arising probably from a subtle amalgamation of idleness and spite, in watching the landing of suffering fellow-creatures from the floating dens of misery in which mankind submits to be conveyed from Calais to Dover, was not so numerous as usual. A merely stormy day has a tendency to attract these ill-conditioned loiterers, as promising more specimens of ludicrous distress and dishevelment, richer opportunities of taking human beings at their utmost disadvantage, and enjoying with impunity the pleasure of ridicule. But a day which is both wet and stormy—a day on which the puddles are blown about, and hats and bonnets are first drenched and then blown off, on which umbrellas are unmanageable mockeries, and the wind cuts the skin off your face, while the rain slaps it—a day which combines these qualities subdues the popular ardour, and quenches in some degree the unspeakable vulgarity of our English sea-side populace.

It was on such a day, when the wind and the rain were doing their utmost to add to the miseries of a crowd of passengers packed like cattle on the deck of a Calais steamer—when the darkness of a wretched winter's evening was rapidly coming down upon the scene, which had only a few stragglers to witness its details of extreme discomfort—that Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin arrived at Dover. The gas, just lighted, was flickering behind the lamp-glasses in the gusts of wind; the porters and hotel servants, waiting for the coming of the boat, were

staggering about, beaten and half-blinded by the wind and rain—no more inhospitable welcome to one's native land could be imagined. Miriam and her husband were not among the tired, draggled, miserable crowd on the deck ; they had no intention of proceeding to London by the tidal train, but were in the stifling saloon below, meaning to land when the confusion should have somewhat subsided.

On one of the hard, narrow sofas, covered with furs and soft warm rugs, lay Mr. St. Quentin ; and by his side, on the rocking floor, regardless of the foul atmosphere and horrid surroundings, knelt Miriam, with a stern, set anxiety in her face, holding a tuft of cotton saturated with some strong restorative essence to his nostrils. They were alone in the cabin, their servants were on the deck, and it was evident that Mr. St. Quentin was very ill. But little of his face was visible as he lay shivering underneath his wraps, but that little was ghastly and distorted with pain. Several of the passengers, as they escaped from the foul air of the cabin to the comparative relief of the wet deck and the driving rain and wind, had glanced with pitying wonder at the prostrate man and the kneeling woman. What reason of sufficient urgency could have induced them to cross the Channel in such weather ? It had been very little better when they left Calais than it was now, when they were within three minutes of Dover. What reason, indeed ? Only the inconceivable, hopeless, irresistible obstinacy of a sick man with a fixed idea ; than which there never was a worse or more unanswerable reason.

Nearly a month had elapsed since Mr. St. Quentin had been taken ill at Paris ; and during the whole of that time he had fixed his mind, from some motive to which Miriam had no clue, on getting to England. He suffered very much, and by no means patiently. As soon as he succeeded in extracting from his medical attendants an admission that he might travel without actual danger, he insisted on leaving Paris ; and he was very near disproving the accuracy of their opinions, for he was so ill and so much exhausted, by the

time they arrived at Calais, that he was obliged to remain for several days.

Those were dreary days for Miriam, full of heartburning, of suspicion, of fear, and of regret. On one of them she made a discovery. Mr. St. Quentin wanted to write a letter, but had found himself unable to do so, and was obliged to have recourse to the services of his valet, who shortly afterwards came to Miriam and asked her anxiously whether she thought it would be safe for his master to "cross" on the following day.

"To-morrow?" exclaimed Miriam. "Of course not. I should say it would be impossible. But why do you ask?"

"Because, madam," replied the man reluctantly, "Mr. St. Quentin has written to a gentleman, a lawyer, from Lincoln's Inn—Mr. Ross, of Messrs. Ross and Raby—making an appointment with him at his chambers for eleven o'clock on Thursday. This is Tuesday, ma'am, and there is only to-morrow."

"Has Mr. St. Quentin said anything to you about his intention?"

"Not yet, ma'am; but he directed me to return, as he had some orders to give me."

"Messrs. Ross and Raby," said Miriam, absently, not heeding what the man had last said; "I don't know the names. Are they a firm of solicitors?"

"I suppose so, ma'am. Mr. St. Quentin looked them out in the *Times'* sale of lands and houses advertisements, and desired me to write to that address."

"Then you think he does not know these gentlemen personally?"

"I think not, ma'am. When Mr. St. Quentin told me I was to write a letter for him he was looking down the advertisement columns of the *Times*, and he said to himself: 'Ross and Raby; I think I have heard of them: yes, they will do;' and then he dictated the letter, and I put their address on it."

"Ah, yes," said Miriam ; and recovering herself with an effort she told the man she would see Mr. St. Quentin presently and dissuade him from attempting to cross, in his state of illness. Already the weather was unfavourable, and threatened to be worse.

She did see Mr. St. Quentin, and she attempted to dissuade him from his purpose, but in vain. He was coldly, sulkily, immovably determined. She left him, feeling uneasy, but yet persuaded that he could not be, in reality, so ill as he appeared, or he would not subject himself to the risk and suffering of so great an exertion. On the following day, though the weather was worse, and he did not appear to be any better, he persisted in his purpose, and was taken on board the steamer with an amount of difficulty which Miriam expected to find considerably increased when it should come to getting him on shore.

The steamer was alongside the pier ; the wretched, dragged, dizzy, tired passengers had landed, and were dispersing, and Miriam's servants had ordered rooms at an hotel, and had the luggage carried thither. Mr. and Mrs. St. Quentin were the last persons remaining on board. He still lay moaning on the narrow sofa, and she still knelt, holding a restorative to his nostrils. But he must be moved now, and with much difficulty he was carried on shore to the hotel ; his face being completely covered, and his form merely a mass of wraps. There was a good deal of bustle on their arrival, and Miriam ordered the men to take him at once to his room. This was done, and the assistants were dismissed, without any one present having seen the face of the sick man.

Presently he recovered a little strength, and the first use he made of it was to order his valet to despatch a telegram to Messrs. Ross and Raby, directing them to send a confidential clerk to Dover on the following day—"a person competent to take instructions for the preparation of a will," were the words of the message—as he was detained there by illness.

"I feel I shall not be able to travel for some days," said Mr. St. Quentin; in which the doctor, who was presently sent for to see him, so entirely coincided that he told Miriam he was astonished Mr. St. Quentin had outlived the journey from Paris.

Miriam was inexperienced, and had never yet associated any serious idea with Mr. St. Quentin's illness. All old men had gout, she believed; and of course, if he would persist in taking doses of powerful and dangerous medicines to check it, instead of staying quietly in his bed, and suffering decently like other people, she supposed he must expect to be much worse than other people; and that was all she had thought about it. But he had suffered such agonizing pain in Calais, and had been ill after so different a fashion from anything she had seen before, that she was very much alarmed, and began to feel quite bewildered by her solitude. The doctor was decisive about the impossibility of moving his patient for several days, under the most favourable circumstances, and Miriam entreated him to tell Mr. St. Quentin this. The invalid was much disconcerted, and declared his abhorrence of being at an hotel. He detested such places; he was sure he should never get better in one of them. He was told plainly that even a short journey by rail might and probably would kill him. Could it harm him to be removed from the hotel to lodgings, or a house, as short a distance off as such accommodation could be procured? That, the doctor said, might be possible, if he had a tolerably good night. It was then agreed between Miriam and the doctor that the best arrangement possible of this kind should be made on the following day, to pacify the patient, though, the doctor thought it right to warn her, he did not anticipate that it would be advisable to allow Mr. St. Quentin to make even so much exertion.

Then, in her turn, Miriam employed the telegraph. She sent the following message to Walter:—

"We are at the *Grand Hotel* at Dover. Mr. St. Quentin

is dangerously ill. Can you come to me? I beg of you to come, if possible, by the first train to-morrow."

The closing in of the night around illness, suspense, and watching is always terrible, even in one's own home, with all the quiet, sympathy, and consideration which home implies. Miriam never forgot the closing in of the night in that strange place, with all the discomfort of an hotel, of strange faces, unsympathizing servants, and her own overwhelming fatigue. She was not old enough to do without sleep, or to endure broken rest, and she had never felt so tired in her life. The rolling of the steamer was in her head, she was sick and giddy, but her mind was clear enough, and busy with her position and its future probabilities. The disposition of their rooms, a sitting-room and two bed-rooms, all three communicating with each other, was fortunate. Mr. St. Quentin had been placed in the inner room, and the next was for Miriam. It was not until every preparation had been made for carrying out the doctor's instructions during the night that Miriam had even the relief of changing her dress. She was looking ill and wan, and her face bore an expression of concentrated care and anxiety. Mr. St. Quentin was in an alarming state of pain and exhaustion for several hours, but then became much easier, and Miriam yielded to the persuasion of her maid, an Englishwoman, who had replaced Bianca, and permitted her to take the post of watcher beside the sick man until the morning. Miriam was staggering with fatigue, and her fear of falling asleep and neglecting the patient decided her. She saw the valet before she left her husband's room, and instructed him to go out into the town on the following morning, and endeavour to procure apartments, or a furnished house, ready for immediate occupation. At length her aching head was laid upon her pillow, but it was long before she slept; her limbs twitched from fatigue; her restlessness was distressing, for she wanted to think, if she might not sleep.

This was, she felt sure, a crisis in her life. Not so much because she might be about to lose her husband, but because.

whether he lived or died, it was plain to her he was going to decide her fate. He was about to make a will, and on that will must depend the solution of the question whether her "great speculation," as in her thoughts she had bitterly called her marriage, was a failure or a success. If he did not secure to her by this will the continuance of the wealth she had enjoyed since her marriage, then she should have sacrificed her youth, her beauty, her conscience, incurred the degradation of a loveless marriage, and exposed herself to the malevolent ridicule of the world, for a few years of luxury and pleasure, just enough to unfit her for humbler things and simpler enjoyments. She was sorry for Mr. St. Quentin. She did not like to see him suffer; but there was no stronger feeling than natural compassion in this—no softening of the mistrustful anger with which she recalled his late conduct, and speculated on his present intentions. She had no reason to think that the sufferings he had undergone, or her assiduous attendance on him during these latter days, had had any influence on his feelings towards her. He was tranquil and easy, but not sleeping, when she left his room, and she had said a few kind words, and taken his hand. But he had only muttered something inarticulate in reply, and drawn his hand coldly away. This had not hurt her; she cared nothing for him; but it had kept up the alarm she had never ceased to feel.

For a long time Miriam lay awake, hearing, through the open door, the occasional murmurs, moans, or impatient questions of the sick man, and the soothing answers of the watcher, or her quiet movements in the adjoining room; but at length, when the wintry dawn was not far off, she fell asleep, and awoke, reluctantly, only at the appointed hour, when her maid, looking pale and weary, came to rouse her.

Mr. St. Quentin had been very ill towards morning, but the pain had again yielded to remedies, and he was quiet now. Miriam arose, put on a warm dressing-gown, and took her place beside him, dismissing her maid to rest.

"Do not come down until I send for you," she said. "If

he refuses to have a nurse, I must get the doctor to speak to him and persuade him."

The doctor came early, and was not encouraging. Mr. St. Quentin was greatly reduced in strength, and there was such debility about the action of the heart that the utmost care and quiet would be necessary. Miriam explained that Mr. St. Quentin was expecting a gentleman from London on business. Must he be refused admittance? The doctor looked embarrassed. It would certainly be better that he should have nothing to excite or agitate him; but still —. Did Mrs. St. Quentin know whether the business in question was important? Very important. It was to give instructions for his will. The doctor looked exceedingly grave. He was very sorry to find that his patient had so anxious and imperative a duty on his mind, but he could not, considering the immense importance of such business, and the extreme uncertainty which, he felt himself bound to acknowledge, attended Mr. St. Quentin's present state, absolutely prohibit the lawyer's visit. He would see Mr. St. Quentin again, when this trying ordeal had been gone through. He then left Miriam, deeply impressed by his gravity of look and manner, and in great perplexity.

She knew nothing about what her position would be, what her legal rights, if Mr. St. Quentin should die without having made a will, and she had every reason to believe, if he did make a will, it would be most unfavourable to her. What should she do? Was it in her power to do anything?

Mr. St. Quentin's valet had come to attend on his master, and was in the room when she returned to it. He was going out soon on the business with which she had charged him. A servant came to the door with a telegram.

"Bring that to me, Bolton," said Mr. St. Quentin.

It was from the firm of Ross and Raby, and informed Mr. St. Quentin that a confidential clerk would wait on him at noon on that day. Mr. St. Quentin then said he thought he could sleep for awhile, but gave orders, as emphatic as in his weak state he could make them, that the gentleman from Messrs.

Ross and Raby was to be brought to him immediately on his arrival. He fell asleep very soon, and Miriam sat, hidden from him by the bed-curtains, listening now to his breathing, anon to the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, sometimes to the wind and rain. She wondered there had been no message from Walter. Perhaps he would arrive at the same time with this lawyer from London; but it did not matter. Then she read the telegram again. The confidential clerk of Messrs. Ross and Raby was not coming direct from town—the message said “from Deal.” No doubt he was already in the neighbourhood on business. She would look at the *Railway Guide*, to find out by what train Walter might arrive. The book was in the sitting-room, and she rose and passed through her own bedroom with a noiseless step, leaving the doors unclosed. She found the *Railway Guide*, and was looking over it, leaning on the table, when she heard steps in the corridor close to the door, and one of the hotel servants turned the handle gently, and looked in. Then he threw the door open and said: “Mrs. St. Quentin is here, sir.”

Miriam turned her head and saw Walter.

It was a strange meeting. They spoke hurriedly, cautiously, lest they should disturb the sleeper. Miriam could not close the doors, lest he should call for anything, for he was alone. They looked long in each other's face, and they both sighed. Miriam led her brother to the farthest extremity of the room, and seated herself beside him, encircled by his arms. How handsome he was looking, she thought, but so much older; and how strangely grey his hair was, almost as grey as Mr. St. Quentin's. Eager question, and answer as eager, soon placed Walter Clint in possession of the circumstances under which his sister had summoned him, and confirmed him in his general impression of Miriam's married life. Then she acknowledged what her purpose had been, until Mr. St. Quentin's illness had prevented its accomplishment, and received from Walter a *hasty* assurance that she should come to him and Florence when she pleased. Miriam had so much to say to him, the

immediate circumstances were so pressing, that she lost all sense of his long absence, and made no allusion to his adventures. Beyond the surprise of the first moment, and the sense of the alteration in the faces, present to the minds of both, there was no strangeness after a little while. Miriam told him that Mr. St. Quentin had as yet made no will, and that a lawyer was to arrive in little more than an hour's time to make one, and that she had reason to believe she should be left with only a bare pittance.

"How do you know?" asked Walter. "What horrible treachery and injustice!"

"I will tell you. I have seen some memoranda of his—they are there, in that desk—on the floor—at this moment, by which it is evident he means—Hush! what's that? Did he call?"

She arose, went to the open folding-door, and stood listening. Mr. St. Quentin did not call, did not speak. After a minute of deep silence, she was moving back towards Walter again, when they both heard a distinct and peculiar sound. It was not articulate—it was like the noise, half clicking, half grating, which a clock makes an instant before it strikes. She stopped, and again stood perfectly still, then said: "It certainly comes from his room. I shall just look at him, and be back in a moment."

She went quickly, but quite noiselessly, Walter's eyes following her through the intervening bedroom; but, as she passed into her husband's room, she partially closed the folding-doors, and Walter lost sight of her.

There was no repetition of the sound. Miriam looked about. All was precisely as she had left it. The sick man was lying huddled up, and with his head bent downwards, turned towards the wall. The rain splashed upon the windows, and the wind rumbled in the chimney. Miriam passed round the head of the bed with a light step, kneeled down on its other side, between the bed and the wall, to look closely at her husband, and found herself gazing into the fixed, senseless eyes, wide open, and upon the fallen, ashy features of a dead face.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ONCE MORE A WAY OF ESCAPE.

NOT a scream, not a sound betrayed Miriam's awful discovery to the listener in the sitting-room. One heavy thump of her heart, one rush of blood into her head, and she remained kneeling, perfectly motionless on the floor between the bed and the wall, holding her temples tightly between her hands, and looking, with fixedness little less than their own, into those wide open eyes. In such moments there is no time; then, at least, the spirit escapes from its bonds. It might have been five minutes, it might have been as many hours, for all that Miriam knew, that she knelt there, spellbound, her limbs heavy and cold, her head whirling, but not lost, not confused. It had come, then. Was this the worst that could have happened? This awful occurrence did not violently break the chain of her immediately previous thought; on the contrary, it continued and strengthened it. Was all lost, in this case, that had been in danger? Not a sentiment of grief, hardly a passing touch of pity, came to Miriam, as she knelt, during those few fearful minutes, by the side of the dead man. It was indeed "the hour and the power of darkness."

She arose with a slight shiver, and went to the mantelpiece. At that moment the timepiece chimed—eleven silvery strokes. And the lawyer was to arrive at noon. One hour only, if every other chance should cohere, for what she had to do. *She* locked the door which opened from Mr. St. Quentin's bedroom upon the corridor, and having completely shut the

folding-doors which communicated with her own room, she went back to her brother; but before she approached him, she looked out of the sitting-room door. No one was near; the corridor was quite empty, and she observed that there were no rooms precisely opposite theirs, only a staircase, and some large presses in the wall. As she came up to Walter, who was reading a newspaper, he said, "Is all right?" laid the paper aside, looked up at her, and sprang up.

"Good heavens, Miriam! what is the matter?"

A mirror on the wall showed her her ghastly face.

"Hush!" she said, and laid a strong hand upon him, forcing him back into his seat. "Don't speak above your breath. Be calm and collected, for my sake. *He is dead!*"

Walter shrank from her, and was silent in horror.

"Yes, he is dead! He has died without a struggle."

"Impossible! And we two here, so near him! Let me see!"

"No, Walter. I tell you it is true. Do you think I can be mistaken? I have been beside him, looking into his face ever since! You must not see him: you must not go near him; it is no question of *that* now; and you must be perfectly calm, and able to help me quickly. We have not an instant to spare."

The colour had utterly deserted her face, but her eyes were sparkling with intense eagerness and entreaty, and the fingers of her right hand held his shoulder like a vice.

"Help you! What do you mean? Had not we better call some one, and send for the doctor at once?"

"No, I tell you; no, no, no! What good can the doctor do to a dead man? Besides, he's coming presently. Oh, Walter, my brother, listen to me! I am young still, and all my future hangs upon this hour, and is in your hands! Oh, Walter, you don't know, you cannot know what my life has been, and how tremendous this blow is to me! You know what I married him for, Walter—to get away from home, and to be rich. He bribed me with such promises, and he tricked

me basely! He persuaded me—for I was vain, and proud of my power over him—that he would dower me all the more splendidly that he did not bind himself to anything; and I believed him, though papa told me I was wrong. Wrong! I was a fool! And he has suspected and insulted me all these horrid years—yes, for though I have had plenty of money and plenty of pleasure, they have been horrid years! And I am to lose it all!”

“But how do you know, Miriam?” asked her brother, who had been unable to interrupt her vehement appeal, all the more impressive and terrible that she never raised her voice, or loosened her grasp on him. “And what can be done?”

“I know, I know!” she resumed. “I have watched him, in one sense, while he watched me in another. He has been in correspondence with a man in America. I don’t know his name, and I don’t know what about, but I can guess; and he meant to leave all his property away from me.”

“What relatives are there? How is his property circumstanced?”

“I don’t know; I only know that it is very large, and mostly in Indian securities. He has no relatives; I am sure of that. He often told me he had no claims on him, absolutely none; and it was only out of spite to me he would have left his money to a man he never saw.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t *know* it, perhaps—at least, he never actually told me so in as many words—but I am morally certain of it. He has repeated to me, over and over again, that no one in the world had any claim on him; and this correspondence shows it is no one in England he has been looking after. In a moment, Walter, I will prove to you that I am right.” She glided away from him, crossed the adjoining room, and, with just an instant’s hesitation, passed through the folding doors which hid the bed and its awful tenant from his sight. In *another* minute she returned, carrying a key. The *traveling-desk* she had pointed out to Walter lay on the floor. She

opened it, took out a few papers—mere slips of memoranda—and knelt by Walter's side, showing them to him. "Here are the proofs of his treachery to me. Read this:—

"C—— advises English lawyer. Mem., to look out for a good firm. In last letter from D——, return of L—— D—— was promised, on receipt of fee and specific statement of intentions."

"And read this, written at Calais—written only three days ago, when he was so ill, and yet determined to cross, because he was in such haste to be cruel and treacherous to me. I do believe he felt that he was dying, and that his great fear was lest the villainy should not be accomplished.

"Mem., shortest form of will for present use. The whole of my property, of whatsoever kind, all invested moneys, furniture, plate, horses, carriages, to L—— D——, with the exception of an annuity to Mrs. St. Q—— of two hundred pounds, to be paid by L—— D——, and secured by him to her, on his taking possession of my property, in any way he thinks proper. Sole executor L—— D——."

On a third slip of paper was the name and address of the firm of Messrs. Ross and Raby, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn.

"This is horrible indeed, my poor darling!" said Walter, looking forlornly at the memoranda; "but it is a comfort to think he has not carried out this intention; and though you may have some trouble, you must be well off. The law makes a secure provision for a widow under such circumstances, and in this case there seems to be no heir."

"No heir, Walter! Who is L—— D——, do you suppose? Of course he is the heir, the heir-at-law, the man who would have come in for Mr. St. Quentin's money if he had made no will at all—the man in America. I am sure of it—he never had a friend he would have neglected all those years, and then suddenly taken to looking after. And I am to lose all, or nearly all, and to bear the disgrace, the humiliation of this, for *him*, for a stranger! What right has he to come in, and rob me of the wealth for which I have paid so heavy and horrid a price? No one knows of these memoranda. This C—— he

mentions must be the man who came to see him in Paris so often lately ; a sly, sleek, horrid man he was : C—— stands for Caux, of course. He had done no business for him, it is plain. He tells him to employ an English lawyer to rob me—and in his hurry to act on this advice, he has died before he could accomplish such wickedness. Caux has drawn no will for him, there is no will ! Walter ! ”—she rose from her knees, and clasped him round the neck, hiding her face from him, as she spoke with passionate rapidity, close to his ear—“ you will not let *any* of this villainy be done to me ; you will save me from the bitterness of all this misery without any reward ; you will remember how you trusted me with Florence, and how I deserved the trust ! Won’t you, Walter ? ”

“ I will—I do,” he said, trying to see her face ; but she held him closer, and spoke lower and more rapidly. “ But what can I do, Miriam ? I don’t know what you have in your mind.”

“ And time is flying,” she murmured. “ I will tell you.” She lifted her head, and looked at him straight and unabashed. “ At twelve o’clock a clerk of Messrs. Ross and Raby’s will be here, in obedience to a message from—him—to take instructions for a will. This man has never seen him ; no servant in the house has seen him. He was carried here from the boat yesterday, with his face covered ; and except our servants—one is out, the other is asleep—no one has seen it. Walter ! in the old days, in which I always helped you and loved you, and was staunch to you, no matter how much I was reviled or punished on your account—in those old days, I say, you were a good actor ; you could dress, and speak, and look a part well, and there was no handwriting you could not imitate, besides writing several hands of your own. Remember the letters Rose Dixon brought to Crescent House. Have you lost your old skill, and your hand its former cunning ? ”

“ Good God ! Miriam—do you propose——”

“ That is what I propose, brother ; it is quite safe, and it injures no one—remember how he would have injured me.”

She held him now, with a hand gripping each shoulder, and looked at him full, with her commanding, gloomy eyes. "When this lawyer comes, he shall be introduced to you, instead of his real client—the firm know nothing of *him*, not even his handwriting; it was his valet who wrote the letter to them—not even whether he is young or old; but you can easily look much older than you do now, and the light need not be strong; and you shall give him instructions to draw a will—you have the model; it is easy and simple; it is only a few lines; it will all be done in a few minutes—and two of the hotel-servants, who have not seen—him—can witness it. The lawyer will go away, and then you, and then the truth shall be told. No one will be wronged, Walter. This unknown man knows nothing of his chance, and never can have expected such a chance to arise; and I—I shall have the reward, the bare pay, I may call it, for all this horrid life, which is done with, and I shall owe it all to you—to you, Walter, who owe so much to me!"

"Miriam, this is madness. Do you know what you want me to do? This is a felony."

"And felony is *a word*! What has *he* done to me? What would he have done if he had lived two more hours? Think of that, Walter, and of the base treachery it means; and think of your own happy home, of Florence, of the child that is coming, and of all *you* have, while I have nothing; if the law gives me anything, I must have it with the sting of suspicion, of calumny—and do this thing for me, dearest Walter, for your sister, who has done and borne much for you! I did not need praying, Walter, when you came to me in disgrace, and asked me to do that for you, for which my father would have turned me out into the streets, if he had discovered it! I needed no prayers, and I never faltered, not then, not after, when this old man heaped insult and suspicion on me, for Florence's sake!"

"But, Miriam——" He hesitated, covered his face with his hands.

"Time flies," she said. "Walter, will you not help and save me? Will *you* be cruel and selfish, and treacherous too?"

There was a moment's silence, then Walter, disclosing a face as white and troubled as her own, said,—

"Show me how it is to be done, and I will do it. Let what will come of it, Miriam, I will do this for you!"

She kissed him without a word. Then, with inconceivable rapidity and quietness, she placed writing materials before him, and collected several books which lay about the room, travelling literature from book-stalls, and French *brochures*, and opened them in a row, at the top of the blotting-book—displaying the fly-leaf of each. A formal inscription was written exactly in the middle of every one of these. Then she went to the desk again, and took out a cheque-book, in which were a number of blank cheques, signed. In all these signatures and inscriptions there was hardly a trace of variation in the characters, forming this name—

LUCIUS CLIBBORN ST. QUENTIN.

"Copy these," she said. "It is an easy hand, the most formal I ever saw. And read the memoranda again. I will be with you immediately." She instantly withdrew, and Walter bent over his task. She went into the room in which the old man lay dead, and collected, from the dressing-table and the chairs, several articles of his clothing, and such dressing things as had been unpacked last night, and carried them into the adjoining room. In a moment she swept away her own toilet apparatus, the gown, bonnet, and wraps she travelled in, and every trace of a feminine presence in the room, locked them into a wardrobe, and replaced them by the things belonging to Mr. St. Quentin. Then she pulled the blinds down, and partially drew the bed-curtains, arranging them so as to interpose between an occupant of the bed and the view of any person in the sitting-room. Her movements were wonderfully swift, but her thoughts far outstripped them. In those few minutes, *which* defied her reckoning, every detail of the scheme she had conceived—who can tell within what an indefinable instant

after her eyes had met the dead eyes—had presented itself to her. Two supreme points of vantage were hers ; she only knew that anything had occurred within these rooms, and no one had a right to enter them, unbidden by her. She might even keep the lawyer's clerk waiting, if it should be necessary ; she was not absolutely tied to time. She was not insensible to the danger of the deed she meditated, but she fairly balanced the chances, and they were heavily in her favour. There was in the disposition of the rooms only one slight risk. Supposing the servants who were to be summoned to witness the will should, in relating the circumstance to their fellows, mention, in the hearing of the housemaid who had attended them, that Mr. St. Quentin was in the outer room ? It was a risk, but only a little one, and when it came into Miriam's mind she dismissed it. The chances were very much against such a risk occurring, and she *must* trust something to chance.

A knock at the locked door of the room in which the dead man lay ! Miriam heard, and replied to it instantly by turning the key, and confronting with a warning gesture the person who knocked. It was Bolton the valet. She stepped into the corridor, and softly shut the door.

" I thought I should have found Mrs. Haines here, ma'am," he said, " as they told me Mr. Clint had come."

" Haines is asleep, I hope," said Miriam. " What is it ? "

Then Bolton explained. He had not found a house or lodgings in the vicinity of the hotel, but had heard of a house about two miles away, on the coast. Should he go and look at it, or would Mrs. St. Quentin think it too far away ? If his master could be got into a carriage and moved at all, that distance would make no practical difference. Miriam assented, and felt, with a thrill in her veins, that here was another point in her favour. The lawyer might propose to employ Mr. St. Quentin's own servant, rather than a stranger, for the purpose of witnessing his will, and here was the valet himself proposing what must take him out of the way, without any premeditation on her part. She told Bolton that she entirely agreed with him,

and begged he would go and see the house at once, and inspect it very carefully. The man was turning away, and she about to open the door when he said : "I beg your pardon, ma'am. I suppose there is no change?"

"No," replied Miriam; "there is no change."

Once more she went into her own bedroom, and looked carefully round. All was in the disorder proper to a man's room; she had but to add the order which should attend illness. She was getting used to what she was doing now, and the tenacity of her will stilled her nerves. Without a tremor she carried the medicine-bottles and glasses, the cups and the flannels, all the sad, significant *appareil*, away from the dead man's bedside, and arranged them in a corresponding place in the outer room. Only a few minutes had been consumed in these rapid arrangements, and while she was making them Miriam's gaze was constantly turned upon Walter, sitting with his back towards the open folding-doors, now writing busily, now thinking, his head resting on his hands. At length she went to him. A sheet of paper, on which the formal inscription on the fly-leaves before him was accurately copied several times, lay on the blotting-book. Miriam put her arm round his neck, leaned over his shoulder, and studied the lines of writing minutely.

"Perfect!" was the one word she said. Then she shut the books, threw them into a corner, twisted up the sheet on which Walter had been writing, put it into the fire, where it was instantly consumed; and, turning to Walter, took him by the arm, saying, "Come. In ten minutes this man will be here."

She led him into the adjoining bedroom, gave him an embroidered dressing-gown of some soft Indian stuff, and a crimson silk nightcap, which she pulled over his forehead, leaving only a ring of his prematurely grey hair showing beneath its border, once more kissed him, said, "Call me when you are ready, and be quick!" and returning to the sitting-room, stood near the door, white, rigid, listening.

In a few minutes Walter called her, softly, and she went to him. His appearance took her by surprise, justly as she had calculated upon his powers of representation. In the bed, in a judicious half-light, lay an old man, propped up with pillows, which yet seemed to give him no support sufficient to counteract the exhaustion which pulled him down from off them; his shrunken figure seemed lost in the folds of the Indian dressing gown, whose embroidered sleeves hung over the large, hirsute hands, which certainly had no appearance of strength. Again she said one word—"Perfect!" and placed a chair near the bed, with a little table beside it, on which were writing materials and a handbell. Then an idea struck her; she flitted back into the sitting-room, and brought one of the railway-books, with the formal inscription on the fly-leaf. There was no reason why it should not lie, open, among the medicine-bottles, left there by the sick man's attendant, and within reach of the sick man's eye. He noted this approvingly, but said nothing. Then, as a step sounded in the corridor, Miriam waved her hand to him, and the next instant had flung herself into an arm-chair beside the fire in the adjoining room, having closed the folding-doors as she passed. She was looking ill and worn, wan with anxiety and fatigue; her hair was in disorder, pushed back from her white face anyhow, but this was all as it should be. She leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes, as she replied to a knock at the door: "Come in."

It was a waiter, followed by a short, fat, bald-headed gentleman, whom he announced as "Mr. Clissold."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ONCE MORE RISKING IT.

"You are the gentleman from Messrs. Ross and Raby, whom Mr. St. Quentin is expecting, I think?" said Miriam, as Mr. Clissold made her a formal bow. Her first glance at the confidential clerk was reassuring. The sole expression of him, in physiognomy and figure, was stolidity. There was no reason to fear his penetrating observation on her appearance, dress, or demeanour. His dull, protuberant eyes rested on her without seeming to see her, and not a muscle in his red face moved. If he had found her weeping violently, or practising the last valse step, attired in the brown robe of a Carmelite nun, or arrayed in the tulle and spangles of an opera-dancer, it would have been all the same to Mr. Clissold. He was not sent to *see* her, and in any business, and therefore solely recognizable sense, he did not see her.

"Yes, ma'am," was his reply.

"I am sorry to say Mr. St. Quentin is very ill. I will inform him that you are here."

"Thank you, ma'am. Clissold, of Ross and Raby's."

"Will you take a seat for a few minutes?" she said, indicating a chair. He complied, without the least change of expression; and Miriam went into the bedroom.

"He has come," she whispered, bending low towards Walter. "I don't think there's any risk. If he is like what he looks, he is a mere machine."

"Send him in," said Walter; and his sister, in the midst of *her* strongly-restrained excitement and terrible suspense, was

conscious that he had some sense of amusement in the playing of his dangerous part.

"Will you have the goodness to come into Mr. St. Quentin's room?" said Miriam to Mr. Clissold, who was sitting upright on his chair, slowly knocking the edges of the soles of his boots together, and neatly fitting the tips of his thumbs and forefingers into a heart-shaped pattern. "I must beg of you to cut this business matter, whatever it may be, as short as possible. He is quite unfit for business, indeed."

"That," replied Mr. Clissold, standing up all of a piece, and looking straight before him, "is for Mr. St. Quentin to decide. I am only sent to receive his instructions."

Under other circumstances Miriam would have said "Brute!" in her own mind, but this particular kind of density served her purpose just then; so she said nothing, but preceded Mr. Clissold into the presence of his client.

"This is Mr. Clissold," she said, softly. "I will leave him with you, and shall be in the next room if you want me.—Take this chair, if you please."

There was no questioning, no speculation in the look which Mr. Clissold bestowed upon the client of Messrs. Ross and Raby, as he complied. He placed his feet in convenient contiguity for tapping, and arranged his finger and thumb tips into a heart-shaped pattern, while he waited for the sick man to enter upon the business for which he had been sent to Dover.

Miriam returned to the arm-chair by the fireside, and tried to remain still; but she could not. On the whole her nerves were wonderfully under her control, but just so far they rebelled. She could almost forget what was actually being done, at least she could force herself to a mechanical thinking of something else, while the great fact was there, unconfessed. And she could rely upon herself to go through with all that must come after, until she should have peace and the full reward; but she could not keep her limbs still. *If they were not in motion they must tremble.* So she rose, and paced the

room from end to end, but her footstep made no sound. There was a hard and constant ticking in her throat, and her lips were dry. Twice she stopped beside a table where there were water and glasses, and drank water, but still her lips and throat were parched. Sometimes she could hear the harsh monotone of Mr. Clissold's business-like voice ; but the sound of the client's never reached her.

After some time the handbell was struck, and Miriam answered the summons.

Mr. Clissold was writing at the little table. The client was lying back upon the pillows, seemingly much exhausted ; and the light in the room was dim, an hour after midday. Great gusts of wind and rain swept round the house with a hoarse, moaning sound.

"Do you want anything?" asked Miriam of the client, who signed to Mr. Clissold to reply, and turned his head aside, breathing hurriedly.

"We shall require two persons to witness Mr. St. Quentin's signature to a certain document, ma'am," said the confidential clerk, in a tone as unmoved and unintelligent as though he had not the smallest notion of the contents of the document then under his hand.

"Very well," said Miriam. "Shall I do for one?"

"Well—no—ma'am ; you won't," answered the confidential clerk deliberately.

"I will send two servants, then," said Miriam ; and turning to the sick man, she said gently,—

"I suppose you would have preferred Bolton, but, unfortunately, he has gone out, and will not be in for some time. Shall I send two of the hotel servants to you?"

"Yes, yes," said the client faintly, with the impatience of an invalid about answering questions.

Miriam rang the bell, and when the waiter came she told him what was wanted. Would he and one of his fellow-servants witness a signature for Mr. St. Quentin? The man assented respectfully. One of the waiters was passing at that

moment, and he called him in. He hoped the gentleman was better; they had understood that Dr. Ashley did say he was very poorly indeed. Miriam answered the civil inquiry with a quivering lip, and the two men went into the bedroom.

Then came a few minutes, which she felt she could not outlive twice; and the two waiters came out. They looked grave and important, and evidently regarded her with compassionate curiosity.

"The gentleman is very bad, surely," said the older man—a model of respectability, who wore shoes cut so low that it was a wonder he could keep them on. "If you please, ma'am, are there any orders for dinner?"

Miriam managed to give some orders; and the men, wholly unsuspecting, left the room, and exchanged confidences, in the corridor, to the effect that "he" was a deal too old for "her;" that she was surprising cut up about it; and that she wouldn't find no difficulty in providing herself with No. 2, for she was uncommon nice-looking. Also, that they didn't care how many old parties made their wills at the *Grand*, and asked them to witness them, if all the lawyers had orders to stand a sovereign apiece, like this one, which he was to have his lunch in the coffee-room, immediate, because he was going up by the express.

Miriam resumed her restless walk, and presently Mr. Clissold appeared, coming through the folding-doors. There was perhaps a shade more deference perceptible in his demeanour towards her, as if he discerned in her a future client of importance to that Ross and Raby in whose interests all his wooden being was merged. Again he made her a formal bow, as she stood still, facing him.

"Is your business completed, sir?" she asked.

"It is, madam," he replied, buttoning his tight coat, and making the presence of a thick paper in his breast-pocket evident by the process—"satisfactorily so. I wish you good morning, ma'am, and leave my best wishes—and those c

Messrs. Ross and Raby—for Mr. St. Quentin's speedy recovery." So saying, he went down to his luncheon in the coffee-room, before leaving for London by the express.

"Get up, Walter, quick!" said Miriam; "the doctor will be here immediately, and Bolton coming back, and I cannot keep my maid upstairs much longer."

Miriam went into the room to him, saying all this in a burst of nervous hurry, which Walter understood as well as she did; but he did not second it. He was weak, worn out, and unable to congratulate himself or her on the wonderful success they had achieved. He had but one wish—to get away; and Miriam saw it. She smothered the pang the consciousness cost her; she thrust back the impulse which would have led her to thank him effusively, and to pour out all the complicated feelings which were in her heart. "Not yet," she thought; "that will be for another time. There is too much to be borne and done now, before I can realize that I am free, independent, rich, and safe."

Walter dressed himself rapidly, and then drank a good deal of wine, while Miriam restored the rooms to their former appearance. This was harder work than the task of their first arrangement. Through all her exultation, all her elation, and the triumph of her success, the over-wrought nerves were beginning to make themselves felt; and when she passed into the dead man's awful presence, to replace the clothes he had worn but yesterday, and the golden gewgaws of his toilet, an irrepressible shudder shook her. Was there any change in the face? Then she remembered, with a start, to have heard that the eyes of the dead should be closed soon after the life has left them, or they will refuse to close. What if those wide open eyes should remain wide open in the coffin, and under the close-packed clay? Miriam knew she must get the remainder of her task done quickly, when such fancies as these were beginning to scare her. He had lain there too long untouched; *it was time he were streaked and straightened for the grave.* She did not look towards the corpse, but rapidly gave the

room the appearance it had worn when her maid had quitted it, poured the portion of the medicine, which should have been administered had the patient lived to take it, into the fire, and rejoined Walter. He did not look up as she came in, and he spoke without raising his eyes.

"Well, Miriam, this is done. Mr. Clissold has taken the will with him to London. It is a terrible thing, but I suppose it will be all right."

"I am sure it will be all right, dearest Walter," said she, in her softest tones of persuasion; "it is bare justice to me; things are different according to circumstances. But we must not talk now. Don't you think, Walter," she continued, suggesting the very thing her instinct told her he wished, but did not care to say he wished, "it would be well for you to go away at once? In all that I have to attend to now, I feel I shall be better alone. You had better get away on foot out of this town; so that, if it be proposed to send for you, you may not be found. The rain has ceased, and the wind is going down. You shall hear from me, to-morrow."

She brought him his coat and hat, and hurried him away. He hardly spoke, but held her tightly in his arms for a while. Then he left her, and it chanced that he did not meet any one on the staircase; but the porter was opening the front-door to give egress to a gentleman just as Walter set foot in the hall. He paused, and waited until this gentleman had descended the steps, and turned away; and then, having leisurely inspected the state of the barometer, he too went out, and turned in the opposite direction. This gentleman was Mr. Clissold, who, as Walter correctly guessed, had taken the road to the railway-station.

"I hope you have had a good sleep, Haines?" said Miriam to her maid, whom she had summoned immediately on Walter's departure.

"Yes, ma'am; I am quite rested."

"I am exceedingly tired: and as Mr. St. Quentin is still sleeping—has been sleeping, indeed, these two hours—you

shall arrange my hair, and then take my place beside him, while I rest a little, until the doctor comes."

"Mr. St. Quentin has had no return of the pain?"

"No return."

Miriam sat patiently while Mrs. Haines brushed her hair, put it away in smooth braids, and changed her dress. She even spoke a little, in a low voice, about the business on which Bolton had gone out, and how much longer it was likely to detain him. Then she lay down on a sofa in her bedroom; and Mrs. Haines, having made up the fire, and inspected the medicine-bottles, seated herself behind the bed-curtain, in awful, unconscious proximity to the dead man.

During several minutes of agonizing endurance Miriam lay still, her arm thrown across her eyes, waiting for the scream with which she expected Mrs. Haines to announce the discovery she must soon make. A few minutes of profound silence elapsed, and then Miriam's ear detected the slight rustling of the woman's dress, and strained itself to follow every movement. If the discovery did not come soon, she should not have strength to hold out; a dull, sickly sense of faintness was stealing over her even now, and the palms of her hands were cold and clammy. The next sound was the click of curtain-rings, as the intervening curtain was cautiously withdrawn by the watcher, alarmed by the stillness. Miriam heard the slight creaking of the bedstead as she leaned over the huddled-up figure, with its back towards her, leaned further yet, heard her step behind the head of the bed, and the whisk of her gown against the wall—followed in her imagination the close, rapid examination which ensued—heard her say, with a gasp, "My God!" and, feeling her approach, shut her eyes firmly, and threw her head back in a perfect imitation of sleep. In a moment the woman was beside her, shaking her gently by the shoulder. Miriam roused herself, and sat up, meeting her maid's pale, scared face with a start.

"Oh, madam!—I—I fear something dreadful has happened! I—I was frightened at not hearing Mr. St. Quentin breathe,

and I went round to look at him, and, indeed, ma'am, it's no use deceiving you, he is gone!"

"Gone!"

"Yes, ma'am. Come and look at him yourself."

Miriam stood up in a blind, uncertain sort of way, catching at the woman's gown; and at that moment the sitting-room door opened, and Dr. Ashley appeared. Mrs. Haines called to him loudly, and he came quickly into the bedroom; but before he could reach her side, or ask an explanation of the looks of the two women, Miriam's hold of her maid relaxed, and she fell in a heap upon the floor.

Ten minutes later, and just as the express train was about to start, a railway official, accompanied by the waiter who had announced Walter's arrival to his sister, ran along the platform, looking into the carriages, and crying out, "Any gentleman of the name of Clint here?" No gentleman answered the appeal; and the train puffed its way out of the station, leaving the official and the waiter looking disconcerted. "He ain't there," said the latter; "I should have known him in a moment." They turned away, talking of the event which had occurred at the *Grand*; and Mr. Clissold, undisturbed by the commotion, went on his prosperous way to London, the bearer of an extension of business to Ross and Raby.

Everything was done most decorously, and in perfect order. After the terrible shock Mrs. St. Quentin had received, Dr. Ashley regarded absolute quiet as indispensable. In Mrs. Haines he found a sensible woman, who did as she was told, and was not over-excited by other people's affairs. Miriam was removed to another floor of the hotel, as soon as she recovered from the merciful fainting-fit which had divided the general attention between the dead and the living, and all the necessary steps were immediately taken. The doctor could not say the lamentable event had exactly surprised him; he had considered Mr. St. Quentin's condition highly precarious, as he had told Mrs. St. Quentin, and he had no doubt *the immediate cause of death was exhaustion consequent*

upon Mr. St. Quentin's having travelled when in an unfit state.

He was very kind to Miriam, and ready to be useful to her in every way, and he admired the clear-headedness and self-control with which she gave her directions, when bodily weakness had passed away. He communicated, by her desire, with Messrs. Ross and Raby, informing them of Mr. St. Quentin's decease, and requesting them to act for her in a professional capacity. He also wrote to Walter Clinton, requesting him to come to Dover.

The reply to this letter was written by Florence, and addressed to Miriam. It was constrained, but Miriam knew this was inevitable. Florence's mind would be disturbed by her knowledge of the truth respecting the marriage thus suddenly terminated, and the sense of what that termination ought to be to the young widow. So she said very little on that point, but told Miriam that Walter could not come to her. He had returned from his brief visit to Dover in a highly nervous state, and with a heavy, feverish cold, which had since increased, and rendered his leaving the house impossible. If Miriam wished it, Florence would come to her.

"And leave her darling husband ill! and travel here, to be with me under such circumstances, in her condition, poor child! No; certainly not," said Miriam, who knew in her heart that the last thing she wished for now was Walter's presence, and the last thing but one the presence of Walter's wife. So she wrote to her sister-in-law that she had found friends, and all the help she needed, and she would not have her come on any account. When everything was settled, she would pay them a long visit at The Firs, but it might be a little time first, as she was Mr. St. Quentin's sole executor, as well as his sole heir; and as the bulk of his papers were in Paris, she might have to return thither direct—that would depend on the counsel of her legal advisers; "besides which," she added, "dearest Florence, I feel, though I cannot explain it, that, for the present, it is best I should be quite alone."

Not a difficulty presented itself to Miriam. Messrs. Ross and Raby conducted her affairs with promptitude and ease. All the customary announcements succeeded that of Mr. St. Quentin's death. No creditors presented themselves—not a claim of any kind was made. Mr. St. Quentin's property was in order so admirable as to be incomprehensible to the legal mind, considering he had never, until literally the day of his death, employed a lawyer. Miriam had no difficulty in ascertaining, from his few perfectly-arranged papers, the exact amount and distribution of the wealth to which she had succeeded. In her capacity of executor she examined all Mr. St. Quentin's correspondence. It was not voluminous, and it was exceedingly uninteresting. If she still felt any of the curiosity respecting his former life, and his first wife, which she had once expressed to Florence, it was destined to remain ungratified. There was not a letter, not a memorandum, relating to it; the only memento of the past which she found among Mr. St. Quentin's possessions was a miniature portrait, in a drawer of an Indian desk he carried about with him, but never used. It represented a fresh, beautiful face, with grey eyes, black hair, and a fine complexion. Miriam had never heard a personal description of the first Mrs. St. Quentin, but she took it for granted the portrait was hers.

One word was engraved upon the oval frame—KATE.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HALCYON DAYS.

THE condition of a young, handsome, and rich widow has been pronounced by some cynical writers to be a very enviable one ; and certainly, when the husband, who has had to die in order to bring about that pleasant state of things, has not been beloved, there is a good deal to say on that side of the question.

Miriam St. Quentin was young, handsome, rich, and a widow. Was she happy in her emancipation and her wealth? "The world"—as the few people who know anything about one call themselves, and as we call them—would have been shocked just at first if it had been said that she was. It had really been such a model marriage, and Mr. St. Quentin such a dear old man, she must feel it very much ! Miriam's demeanour as a widow was no less commendable than her conduct as a wife. The period of seclusion which custom and her own good taste assigned to her would not more than suffice for the planning and organizing of her future life. She still believed in such possibilities. A plan formed in haste had succeeded so thoroughly for her, that she was convinced she had only to set about the construction of an elaborate scheme, at leisure, to be equally secure of its realization. If there was any point on which her mind was thoroughly made up, it was that she had done no moral wrong. She knew she had broken human laws ; but they are not infallible, and their intention is the prevention and the redress of injury, injustice, and cruelty. They cannot take account of every vagary and contrariety of circumstance, and modify themselves accord-

ingly. Mr. St. Quentin had meditated a great injury, injustice, and cruelty to her, and she had prevented his carrying out that intention ; against the law, indeed, because its formula was not with her, but not against its spirit, which is that of fairness and honesty.

She would do a great deal of good with her money. That intention figured largely in her plan. Among her vague notions of religion was an idea that God Almighty demands a tithe of all the possessions of the rich for His poor, and that penalties would be found, at the great settling of accounts, to attach to the neglect of this obligation. She would not neglect it, but fulfil it to the letter, and then go beyond it, into the spiritual realm of charity, including personal ministration and active sympathy. Miriam had no idea of restitution or reparation in all this ; she genuinely believed in her own right ; but charity was a use for wealth which was very pleasant to her. She had always helped the poor largely from her private resources, but she had never known Mr. St. Quentin to do so. Well, this should all be changed. There should be a fixed system, and then a liberal margin.

Of course Miriam made up her mind that she would not marry again. All young widows form this resolution. Either the lost happiness is never to be replaced, or the memory of it impaired, or the new and delicious freedom is never to be sacrificed to another venturesome risk : this is according to former circumstances. But Miriam had another reason, in addition to the second of these two, for arriving at this resolution. Henceforth there must be a secret in her life ; not burdensome to her, indeed, justified by her own knowledge, but to be known only to herself and Walter. No third person must ever share it. If she were to permit herself to love any man—and she would now marry only in obedience to that unknown sentiment and impulse—she must impart that secret. Instinct told her this would be impossible. You see, Miriam had as yet learned only elementary lessons from life, and she was still applying the line and the plummet to an edifice of

which Fate was to the real arbitrary builder, while she was to look on, helpless and amazed.

She was not an absolute unbeliever in love ; she was too sensible to slip into any cynical jargon on the subject. She knew that love existed, and formed the great principle, motive, and reward of many human lives. As a passion she had little comprehension of it, and no esteem for it ; but as a strong and abiding sentiment she regarded it with admiring respect. But Miriam knew that one " could not have everything in this world," according to the trite, wise old saying, and she thought, on the whole, one might do very well without love. Her marriage had not been unhappy for want of love ; she was quite sure she should never have missed *that*, or thought about it at all, if other drawbacks had not existed. And so, without undervaluing it in the least, she quietly put it aside, out of her calculations, in the scheme she was constructing for the future.

Miriam intended to have a house in London. She would retain the apartment in Paris, and divide her time pretty equally between the two capitals. She had not acquired a taste for rurality, and she was tired of travelling about the Continent of Europe. Far off, in the recesses of her fancy, there lurked visions of more extended travel, when she should break conventional bounds, and see the ancient wonders of the earth in the East, and the modern achievements of science in the West ; but these projects were in the far future. She had to set her new life going, to surround herself with fresh interests and duties, and make for herself a place in the sort of society to which she chose to belong. In visits—which she did not, somehow, contemplate as very frequent or much prolonged—to The Firs she should find quite as much English country life as she cared for. In occasionally sharing the home of Florence, Walter, and their prospective children—there was only one baby at The Firs as yet—she should have enough of the domesticities to preserve her from unwomanly callousness and isolation.

Miriam had passed four months in Paris, after her return thither subsequent to Mr. St. Quentin's death. During two months of the four she was not alone. Miss Monitor had realized the dream of many years of dreary drudgery in the providing of young ladies with every accomplishment under the sun. She had made enough money to retire from the occupation which many good people, whose destiny has not obliged them to keep schools, consider so very ennobling. If the honest, collected testimony of school-mistresses could be procured the result would probably be found to be the very reverse, and these often excellent women would acknowledge that nothing is so conducive to a sordid turn of mind and a general attitude of insincerity.

Miss Monitor was perfectly honest about it all. She was not only unfeignedly delighted to have the cottage and the cow—for which she had longed as persistently as Warren Hastings longed for Daylesford—but enchanted to have done with the occupation itself. She had never liked "girls;" she inclined to believe nobody ever did like them, except their own mothers, and that in moderation, and she was frankly thankful to have done with them for evermore.

"Talk of breaking-ups and holidays, my dear!" she said to Miriam: "what was their escape *to mine*? I'm sure it was a glimpse of heaven to feel the house so silent and so empty, and to see the box-room rid of their trunks! It didn't last, though; there was the cleaning-up for them to come back, almost as soon as I had got it well into my mind that they were gone."

It was a great treat for Miss Monitor to go to Paris in the clear, early spring-time, and to be shown everything, except the theatres and "company," as she called it, by Miriam. She did not object to the exceptions; the theatres would have horrified, and French "company" have puzzled her; and Miriam was exquisitely kind to her good friend. To think of her having ever been afraid of Miss Monitor, and having regarded her as an emporium of mysterious learning!—Miss

Monitor, who, in reality, was the simplest-minded of women, though knowing in her own former department—and in comparison with whom Miriam was a perfect sage in knowledge of the world. Now that no ulterior educational object was included in her visits, Miss Monitor enjoyed the museums, the buildings, the picture-galleries, the historic monuments, with a delicious intensity; and the long drives in Miriam's luxurious carriage, when, well wrapped up in furs, and regardless of time and temperature, the friends visited all the environs of Paris, were especially delightful to her.

There was only one particular in which Miriam did not fulfil Miss Monitor's expectations; she never talked of her late husband, that most gentlemanly and admirable person, who had always been to Miss Monitor the *beau-ideal* of all that one could wish a husband to be—who was, well, just a little older than might have been desired. She would have liked to hear "all the particulars;" but Miriam did not indulge her with any. With this one exception, Miss Monitor's visit to Paris had been a perfect success. It was within a few days of its close now, and Miriam was thinking, with reluctance, which she did not closely analyze, that she ought to accompany her friend back to London, and make her long-deferred visit to The Firs.

Miss Monitor's cottage and cow were at Blackheath, and their proud proprietor was most anxious that Miriam should visit her and behold her in all the glory of possession. Miriam was tempted to accede to her request; the cottage would furnish a sufficiently-retired base of operations for her, whence she might proceed to select her own house in London, conveniently communicate with Messrs. Ross and Raby, and *when she must*, go on to The Firs.

When she must! Had it come to this with Miriam, and had she never asked herself why, and how? She had been wildly anxious to see her brother, and be with him; she had been prepared to make his conduct respecting Walter the *subject* of a quarrel between herself and her late husband, in-

volving consequences which she could not calculate ; and now she had an indescribable, unconquerable shrinking from the idea of seeing Walter, a shrinking which extended to Florence. Why was this? Why should she contemplate calmly—when-ever she was driven to the contemplation of it at all, more rarely as the time went by—the deed in which they had been accomplices, and yet be unable to contemplate calmly the prospect of being brought into daily contact with Walter? Why, above all, should she shrink from seeing Florence? Miriam could not quite shut out those questions ; they would ask themselves of her ; but she dismissed them with a shrug of her shoulders, and that ready, convenient word of explanation, “Nervous!”

On a bright day, one of the latest in March, as crisp, as clear, as cold as that day, months ago, of which she is in some unaccountable way reminded, Miriam is in her boudoir, with the conservatory at the end, where the fountain is shedding its tinkling tears into the alabaster basin, and the bright-winged birds are fluttering and cooing behind the silvery wires of the aviary.

A brisk wood-fire is burning upon the hearth, and Miriam’s writing-table is drawn close to the fireplace. She has been very busy this morning. In anticipation of her absence from Paris—for she has made up her mind to go to England with Miss Monitor—she has been looking into her affairs, and setting aside sundry sums of money for various charitable purposes. Her table is covered with account-books and papers, but it is very orderly for all that ; and a row of little piles of napoleons and five-franc pieces is ranged at her left-hand. These are to be given to her almoners, two Sisters of St. Vincent and Paul, who visit the poor and sick in her neighbourhood, and who will come presently to receive this liberal contribution.

Miriam looks very handsome in her widow’s dress, which has none of the eccentricities and exaggerations of the modern fashion in “weeds.” Her bright hair is smoothly banded

under the crimped borders of her cap ; and her large, limpid, golden eyes and broad, low, white brow are dignified, and lent an additional serene beauty by the severe framework in which they are set. The cabinet of ebony, ivory, and silver stands at her right hand, between her chair and the fireplace. Its doors are open, one drawer is pulled out, and any one who cared to inspect its contents would find among them the miniature of a handsome lady with grey eyes, black hair, and a fine complexion, whose name was Kate ; the letter written by Lawrence Daly, at Walter's dictation, which Miriam had discovered among Mr. St. Quentin's papers ; and a number of enigmatical memoranda, in which figures fill a considerable space, and which appear to refer to certain payments made at irregular intervals for some unspecified purpose.

But the memoranda which Miriam showed to Walter at the *Grand Hotel* at Dover are not there ; she has destroyed them ; and all the events to which they referred, together with the rage and terror, the suspense, excitement, and the triumph of that time, are as utterly gone and lost sight of as they are.

Just as Miriam has concluded her pleasant task, Miss Monitor comes in, brisk and bright, tight and talkative as ever, and full of the instructions which she has despatched to her cook at the cottage at Blackheath.

"Only that Ruth has had her feelings blunted by cooking for a girls' school for eight years, and is not easily put out, she might be alarmed at the idea of such a grand visitor as you, my dear !" said the happy little lady.

"I hope she has not left off making small currant dumplings sprinkled with powdered sugar," replied Miriam. "If you only knew how often I have wished for one since !"

"Dear me ! The idea of any one ever wanting to eat anything again one has eaten at a school-room dinner !" said Miss Monitor simply. "You shall have them, my dear, and then you will find out how nasty they are. Mercy on us, Miriam ! Is all that money for the Sisters ?"

"All that money is for the Sisters' poor people," said Miriam; "and it is sadly little among so many."

"Well, my dear," said Miss Monitor, admiringly, "I must say it is delightful to see money in such good hands as yours. And it is more than I expected of you, much as I liked you, for you were not very thoughtful or considerate, in the abstract, I mean—not unless you knew people, and liked them individually—in the old times. I think Mr. St. Quentin's influence and example must have done you a great deal of good, strengthened and developed your character. Don't you think so, Miriam?"

"I suppose it did," answered Miriam, indifferently. She was not to be tempted into talking of Mr. St. Quentin, and presently the conversation turned upon their journey; upon the pleasurable business of selecting a house for Miriam in London; and upon all that Miriam was to do and to enjoy when she should have the house. She was in high spirits that day; she was really happy. She did not talk to herself about it, but she thoroughly appreciated the difference which it had made in her life to be free from the presence of a person whom she had come to dislike. She felt this so strongly that she, who had never known love, sometimes asked herself—when the subject would persist in pressing upon her attention, would not be put away—whether the presence of the beloved could be such an ever-delightful, conscious, precious source of happiness as the absence of any one to dislike; the freedom of daily, hourly, jarring chords in one's existence. Everything seemed to be going perfectly smooth and easy with Miriam now, and she looked like it, handsome, grand, happy, generous, authoritative. Of future possibilities for her heart, she had neither hope nor fear; of future possibilities for her intellect, she had great store of hopes and plans.

Mr. St. Quentin's notion of pleasant society had not comprised intellect. Fashion, if not of the very first rank, of a very good second rank, he had aspired to with some success, and he did not mind its being combined with dulness, as for

the most part it was. Miriam did. She had delightful visions of the society of "clever" people, of a charming house which should be frequented by charming creatures who wrote books, painted pictures, composed music, and understood the art of conversation. She had heard the word "Bohemian" somewhere, and she believed she knew what it meant. There should be no Bohemianism in her "literary and artistic circle;" all the artists, authors, composers, and talkers should be quite respectable, but highly gifted. She revealed these great designs to Miss Monitor, who received them coldly. Miriam was hardly ever silly, and a little silliness once in a way was easily pardoned by her good friend.

"You can try it, my dear," she said, dubiously. "You may remember I told you my father was an author—in the solid, biographical line—and he is as much forgotten as if he had been one of the modern three-novels-in-three-volumes-each-a-year-people. He used to say there was no such mistake as literary society; no duller people anywhere than authors and artists, chiefly, I suppose, because they are generally very tired with hard work, and want people to amuse *them*. I can't say I cared for any of them whom I used to see when I was a girl, especially if I had liked their books or their pictures very much before I made their acquaintance. They certainly never amused *me*. However, as I said before, you can try."

Miriam thought this was all rubbish, and resolved that she would try.

The last few days in Paris were very pleasant to their friends. Miriam was rather sorry to leave her pretty rooms when the time came, even for the prospect of novelty in her London home. She loved them, she prized everything in them. She was very generous, but she had acquisitiveness largely developed in her character. If she had been a man she would have delighted in adding field to field, in flocks and herds, and in money-bags, though she would have dispensed their contents with a liberal hand. Being a woman she loved her *furniture*, her rich carpets and hangings, the beautiful things

which filled her rooms, her plate, and her porcelain, her equipages, and her jewels. She would have shared them lavishly, but she loved them every one, she who had never known what it was to love, beyond the calm circle of kindred, and had no notion of a power which could smite the idols from their place in her heart, and dash them into dust.

A few hours after Miriam and Miss Monitor had left Paris, a well-appointed but plain *coupé* drew up at the great gate of the hotel, and a gentleman stepped out and accosted the *concierge*. This gentleman was a dapper personage, of middle height and spare figure, with a clean-shaven face and shrewd, observant eyes. He was dressed with an accurate plainness and elaborate neatness which gave him somewhat the air of an Anglican clergyman of High Church principles. Since Mr. St. Quentin's death this gentleman had not been seen at the hotel, and the present *concierge*, being new to the place, did not know him. After a few minutes' parley the dapper gentleman committed a card and a letter to the care of the *concierge*, got into the *coupé* again, and was driven away.

At the same moment one of Mrs. St. Quentin's servants, whom she had left in Paris, came in at the *porte-cochère*.

"Hold!" said the *concierge*. "Here has been a little Monsieur inquiring for Madame; and much chagrined at her departure. He has confided to me this letter and card, to be sent to the address of Madame."

The servant leaned on the ledge of the little window through which the *concierge* addressed him, and inspected these articles.

"Hold!" said he—"Monsieur Caux! Why comes he hither again? It used to be for Monsieur only."

"Who is he—this Monsieur Caux?"

The man laughed.

"What know I? Ask that in the Rue Jerusalem."

"Ho, ho!—is he there? That understands itself—these old gentlemen, as they tell me Monsieur was, have lived, in ordinary, and find agents who may be trusted, convenient. But why——"

"I have changed my mind," said a clear, quiet, polite voice behind the servant's shoulder, causing him to start away from the aperture, and the *concierge* to look up surprised, "and will forward my letter to Madame St. Quentin myself, if you can give me her address in England."

"Certainly," said the *concierge*, on whom the mention of the Rue Jerusalem in connexion with the name of M. Caux had produced a salutary effect. "Perhaps Monsieur will copy the address himself;" and he laid a book open before M. Caux, from which that gentleman transcribed on one of his cards Miriam's address at Blackheath; while he was doing this the servant went on into the hotel.

"That is much better," said M. Caux, as he carefully replaced the letter in a case, full of neatly-folded papers, suspended in the carriage within easy reach of his hand—"much better. She might take no notice of a written application. but she can hardly refuse me a personal interview, demanded on the strength of this. There may be something to come of it, and there may be nothing—time will show. The old gentleman paid me in full; I have no claim; still this *may* be worth another fee to me, and it will certainly keep until she returns from London."

"Madame had left Paris that morning," had been the answer of the *concierge* to M. Caux's question. Only a few hours, only an unpurchasable, immeasurable, irreparable space between her and the knowledge she might have gained of the truth! The letter which M. Caux had decided to retain till her return was addressed to himself, and consisted of only a few lines, dated from New York, three months before, but which, by some accident, never explained, had not been posted until the last mail. The lines were as follows:—

"*L—D— intends to go to England in the spring, and will then communicate with Mr. St. Quentin.*"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A TERROR OF GREAT DARKNESS.

ON a bright, soft, April day Miriam arrived at The Firs. She had chosen her house in London, and set decorators and upholsterers to work upon it. She had brightened up Miss Monitor's life by her visit to the cottage, her admiration of the cow, and her promise to repeat these kindnesses; and now she had come, with reluctance, but with good courage also, to the ordeal of meeting Walter. It seemed to her that this was the only thing she should have to dread henceforth in life, and that the meeting, the first look into each other's eyes, the first few minutes passed together, without the presence of any other person, over, this phantom—for she held it a mere phantom—would be laid, like the rest, and her way would be quite plain. So, when the time which had been arranged for her visit came, she went to the trial calmly.

Florence was in great delight. The prospect of having Miriam in her old home with Walter, in unrestricted freedom, all the former misery and dissension utterly gone for ever; and that most wonderful of all babies to be shown to his aunt, was as much happiness as Florence could desire in this world, now that her Walter was at home "for good." She did not actually say to herself that it was very pleasant to make up their family party without Mr. St. Quentin; she would have been shocked to find herself thinking anything so dreadful, but she certainly was a little curious to see how Miriam looked in her weeds, and fully expected to find her in capital spirits. Florence was a pretty picture in those days. In the fulness of her happiness, the realization of her thoroughly feminine ideal,

her beauty had matured, and the added self-possession of her manner took nothing from its gentleness and its grace. She was as busy as a bee, but she was not fussy, and she was not narrow. Her whole heart was centred in her home and its beloved inmates ; but her intellect overstepped that boundary, and Florence Clint was as perfect an example as could be found of a true woman who, incapable of the moral discord implied in deserting her own sphere, assiduously aspires to the best standard of duty and culture within it.

The sisters-in-law were both beautiful, each in her own style and way ; but there was more than the difference between them of stature, complexion, and temperament. There was the difference between the childless wife and the mother ; between the woman who has never loved, and the woman who from girlhood has borne the sacred burden of solicitude and care for another, the weight of a double life. When Florence thought most lovingly of Miriam, she pitied her most for this. And Miriam did not pity herself in the least. She had never wished for children, and she had been content to do so without love in the past, and contemplated a picture in which it was to have no place with complacency. The spectacle of Florence's domestic happiness would have for Miriam no drop of bitterness, no suggestion of envy.

Miriam had expected to find Walter at the station at Drington, and had prepared herself to get over the only nervousness she anticipated having to feel during the drive to The Firs. But Florence was on the platform when the train came up, without Walter ; and then Miriam thought her brother was shrinking from the meeting even more than she was. Florence was not surprised. As they were rattling along in her pretty pony-carriage she told Miriam he was delighted she was coming, but he was dreadfully lazy—sometimes it was really too bad—and he hated driving the ponies. Miriam asked if he rode. But it appeared he did not ; he hated riding, said *it shook him*, and made his head ache. He liked staying in the house best, it seemed, and was so fond of playing with

baby that he was to be forgiven for apparent laziness on that account. Miriam thought it was very real laziness, and decided in her own mind that Walter must have altered very much since his "digger" days. The two women looked furtively at one another during the drive ; and Miriam then told Florence frankly she had not believed she could have grown so very pretty, so much more than pretty ; but Florence did not tell Miriam she had been curious to see her in her weeds.

Walter met them at the door, and he greeted Miriam with frank, unembarrassed affection. Her heart beat heavily, and she felt that her face turned exceedingly pale as she returned his kindly kiss, and looked into his eyes for that pang of recollection which she was prepared to find there. But she did not see it. There was not the slightest shrinking of his eyes from hers, not the most fleeting change of colour or hesitating inflection of the voice. He bade her welcome as if they had met last under the most ordinary circumstances, and was so spontaneously cheerful and unconcerned that Miriam found it difficult to impute his demeanour to self-control. She felt there was much greater power in that way in herself than in Walter, and yet she could not on this occasion reach such as his composure. They all entered the house together ; and Florence went for the wonderful baby, leaving Walter and Miriam together in the study.

"Now," she thought, "there will be a reference. Now he will say or look something, and then it will be over for the future."

But he neither looked nor said anything. He talked of her house in town, and pointed out some improvements in Florence's flower-garden. And then Florence came in with the baby, and after a family offering of incense to that small divinity, they adjourned to dress for dinner. Miriam was relieved, and yet puzzled ; she could not understand her brother, she felt somehow as if this man were not Walter. Their brief, eventful interview at Dover had been so momentous she had had no time to think of him, to take note

of the change in his appearance ; except his grey hair, she had not observed any. But she did now ; she noticed his indolent manner, his sleepy expression, and his look of age. She must question Florence about his health.

At dinner, Walter was very lively and agreeable ; but Miriam, observing him closely, saw that there was a curious indecision about him. There was not much carving done at table, but Florence did it all. Walter paid no attention to anything but his own dinner ; and even about that was slow and awkward, letting his fork drop, and upsetting his wine-glass. As the ladies were leaving the dining-room, Florence leaned over his shoulder, and said :—

“Don’t be long over your wine. Miriam wants to hear all about the gold-diggings to-night ; so don’t go to sleep here.”

“Does he go to sleep after dinner ?” asked Miriam.

“Indeed, he does,” replied Florence. “Isn’t it a horrid habit ? Almost every evening I have to go and shake him up ; and sometimes he falls asleep after luncheon. Indeed, I often tell him he has quite an unfair allowance of sleep in his life.”

“Do you think that is safe, Florence ?—good for him, I mean ? What does he really do, dear ? What are the occupations of his life ?”

“The occupations of his life ? Well—I can hardly tell you. He is not agricultural, you know, so we’ve let the home-farm ; and he’s not fond of gardening—it makes his head ache. A great many things make his head ache since he had that terrible fever.”

“Does he manage the place well ?—look after things, and all that ?”

“Well, indeed, I cannot say he does,” said Florence, laughing ; “he says I do all that sort of thing better than he does, and that it tires him. He does not even care about the stables. I’m afraid, Miriam, I must confess he’s lazy ; but you must not blame him. He had to work so hard for such a long time ! And he is so sweet-tempered, and so fond of baby and me,

and no trouble in the house. You won't mind him being what he calls 'all about' a good deal, will you, Miriam? He is not a bit like other men, interfering with women's occupations and bothering them."

"I shan't mind it in the least, dear," replied Miriam, who was thinking—"He may not be a bit like other men, but he is also not in the least like my brother Walter." And she went on—"Is he fond of reading?"

"He does not care for reading to himself, but he likes me to read to him, and I do, when I have time. But I have been threatening him to leave off lately, he falls asleep so often."

"That was a very bad fever, was it not, he had just at the time our father died?"

"Oh, yes, dreadful! You may imagine how frightened I was when he was ill in the winter, after he left you at Dover; and Mr. Martin said it was a strange kind of fever, with which he was not familiar. I did not tell you at the time, because you had so much to distress you," said Florence, in her simple way; "and it would have been time enough for you to know, if it had been absolutely necessary to alarm you about him; and it did not last long. Mr. Martin said, when Walter recovered, that he had treated the fever almost at random; but he had certainly treated it successfully. He was very weak and quiet for a long time, and seemed rather indifferent about everything except me, and baby, when baby came; but it left no bad effects, thank God!"

"I am not by any means so sure of that," thought Miriam. "Was he delirious in the fever?"

"Oh, yes: his mind wandered awfully. But Mr. Martin said that was better. There must have been stupor if it hadn't. He frightened me first, and made me think it was not a feverish cold, but fever, by talking about an old man in an Indian gown and a red night-cap making a will, and looking in the *Times* for somebody to leave his money to.—Why, Miriam, you are as pale as death. Perhaps you don't like to hear about *anything* of that kind."

"I do, indeed—I do. I only turned pale at the idea of Walter having been in such danger."

"As I have done many a time, when I have thought that he might have died of the first fever out in that horrid place; and Mr. Daly too; and we might never have heard anything about either of them. And he must have died, if it had not been for Mr. Daly. I wish you could hear Walter tell the story himself; but he must not. I never mention it to him."

"Why?"

"Because it distressed him so much. Mr. Daly, you know, had the fever before Walter took it, and he never quite got over the effect of it. He is, or was, when Walter and he parted, a little eccentric—it was a delusion—which grew up in the fever, and never left him. I will tell you about it some other time; I must go and wake Walter now. If I didn't, he would sleep there for hours."

With a sweet, happy smile on her untroubled face, Florence left Miriam, who was much, though vaguely disturbed by what she had just heard. Subsequent observation of Walter did not tend to reassure her. Before her first day at The Firs had reached its conclusion, Miriam's mind was so fully engaged in puzzling speculations concerning her brother, that she had ceased to think about the mutual associations between herself and him, for the indications of which she had so painfully looked.

Walter came back with Florence. He had been asleep, he acknowledged, and perhaps that accounted for his looking dull and stupid, and for an uncertainty in his gait which his sister observed at once. During the whole evening he sat still. He talked to them, and was very happy; but where was the restlessness so characteristic of men in health, when they are under no restraint? If Walter had walked up and down, in his old way, while he told them his Californian stories, Miriam would have liked it much better. Florence sat on a footstool beside his chair, resting her head against his knee, looking up at Miriam; and when he paused, as he often did, for a name

or a word, she smilingly supplied it. And this not only when the topic was his Californian adventures, but when, later, they strayed into ordinary subjects of conversation, and Walter would pause, not from the suspension of the mechanism of speech called stuttering, but from an evident lapse of memory. Then Florence would speak the last word, and he would go on. Again, for a few moments, before they separated for the night, Walter and Miriam were alone together. This time she determined, anything being better than the vague, mysterious alarm which was creeping over her, to lead him directly to the subject in her thoughts.

"Walter," she said, "will you let me tell you how much I felt about meeting you, after all that had passed, and—"

"Of course, I know; but don't talk of it, Miriam. I would have come to you, in your trouble, if I could, but I was very ill, you know. Caught cold, and had a fever. It really was not my fault."

"*Would* have come to me, Walter? Why, you *did* come to me!"

"Yes, yes; I started, after you telegraphed, of course; but there was nothing in *that*, you know; I could not go on, and indeed I hardly know how I got home. But don't let us talk of it, Miriam; I hate unpleasant subjects."

Miriam obeyed him. Indeed, she could not speak. To utter astonishment was added a thrill of indescribable dread. For a moment she actually felt afraid of Walter himself, sitting there, in his chair, before her, perfectly calm, and making her this unaccountable reply. He was talking of the second time she had sent for him; she, of the first, and yet, the second summons had been by letter, not by telegraph. Miriam said no more; but, when Florence was with her upstairs, in her own old room, she questioned her as closely as she dared about Walter's illness. Florence answered her freely, and, being skilfully led up to the point by Miriam, told her it was such an odd thing that Walter had forgotten all about his having gone

to Dover, and was at the utmost distress at his inability to comply with Dr. Ashley's summons.

"Mr. Martin said it was part of the delirium of the fever," added Florence, "and told me not to talk to him about it at any time; and so, of course, I have not done so. Let me brush your hair, Miriam, for the sake of old times!"

Then the two young women drifted into a sentimental, reminiscent conversation, which, however, did not so far divert Miriam from the matter in her thoughts but that she resolved to discuss it with Mr. Martin at the first opportunity.

The opportunity offered itself the next day but one. Mr. Martin and Mrs. Cooke, and many others among the neighbourhood, who had once stood aloof from The Firs, but had been won, to a man and a woman, by Florence, were all anxious to see how the young, handsome, and rich Mrs. St. Quentin looked in her weeds. The result of this laudable curiosity was an impromptu luncheon party at The Firs, and afterwards a general stroll in the gardens and plantations—where the young, green tassels were beginning to hang themselves out. Miriam detached Mr. Martin from the party, and entered upon the matter in her thoughts with characteristic promptitude and directness, by asking him to give her a detailed account of Walter's illness at the time of Mr. St. Quentin's death.

Mr. Martin complied; and Miriam learned from his narrative that her brother had been ailing from the moment of his return to The Firs, and that delirium had set in very rapidly. He described the wandering of the mind, and repeated much to which she had the key. Mr. Martin acknowledged that he had believed Walter's mental condition to be unsound for some time after Florence thought him perfectly well again, but he had no suspicion that anything of the kind now existed. He had not seen much of him since his recovery, having been away from Drington for nearly three months; in his professional capacity he had, since his return, visited only the

sovereign and all-absorbing baby, and he had not taken particular notice of Walter. Miriam, who could not explain the chief source, the real inspiring cause of her disquiet, laid great stress upon his somnolence and indolence; but she did not impress Mr. Martin very seriously.

"The truth is, my dear," he said, "I am accustomed to regard Walter as such an uncommonly lucky dog, that I am not surprised to find him turning out an uncommonly idle one also. With such a wife to adore him—a woman as clever as she is good; nothing that *must* be done, to do; plenty of money; the remembrance of very hard work, which makes a holiday life apt to prolong itself, and a fine natural capacity for indolence—you must permit me to remind you, my dear, that Walter never *liked* work of any kind—I really think we need not put his laziness down to any more recondite cause than content."

"Do you think it is content that makes him look so old, ten years older than his age, and at least five years older than climate can account for? Is it content that makes him drop all sorts of things out of his hands, and look vacantly at them when they fall? Is it content that makes him lie down on the sofas all about the house, whenever there's no one to watch him, and rouse him up, and that renders him almost insensible to pain?"

"What!" said Dr. Martin; "Walter insensible to pain? He used to be quite the reverse."

"He gave himself one of the worst cuts I ever saw, this morning, with a broken pane of glass in the conservatory, and I don't think he knew he had cut himself. I was close by, and I knew nothing, until I saw blood on baby's frock, and found it came from Walter's hand."

"That's bad," said Dr. Martin. "Anything more?"

"Many things more. He hardly ever speaks without stammering, and he constantly stands with his eyes shut. Florence notices none of these things; she is always with him, and is the most serene-minded and adaptive of women. Besides—

Mr. Martin, pray attend to this—he eats a great deal more than he ought to eat.”

“My dear Miriam, this is one of your French notions.”

“Indeed, it is not. I think French people habitually eat more than English people—it is my observation. I don’t like the quantity he eats, or the way in which he eats it. You dine with us to-day; will you promise me to watch him, and judge for yourself?”

“I will.”

They rejoined the party; and Miriam saw that Mr. Martin kept an unseen watch upon Walter during the whole of that day. In the course of the week he came several times to The Firs, and though he said nothing to her on the subject, she was satisfied that he was steadily taking observations, and that those observations were leading him in the direction of the apprehensions which she, for a reason far outweighing any within his ken, entertained more and more keenly day by day. The unconsciousness of Florence, while it was most fortunate, touched Miriam deeply. When anything odd, unusual, uncouth, in Walter’s demeanour made itself apparent, Florence was only anxious to conceal it, if possible; and if that was not possible, to account and apologize for it in some simple way. To keep him from the possibility of being blamed by *others* was her object; it never occurred to her to read the meaning of these things *to himself*.

When Miriam had been a fortnight at The Firs, during which time Mr. Martin had rarely allowed a day to elapse without a visit, he said to her,—

“When is your house in town to be ready for occupation?”

“At the end of next week, I expect.”

“I advise you to go there, to hasten the preparations by your presence, and to dispense with all superfluous arrangements. My dear Miriam, you are right about poor Walter. I have watched him too closely to be mistaken. You must *get him* and Florence up to London, immediately, on the best pretext you can devise. When you have them there, she must

be told the truth, and the best advice in the profession must be procured without delay. There has been too much already—though, God knows, I don't! whether it is ever of much use in such cases."

"God help him and her!" said Miriam.

And so the first blow was dealt by Fate to that fair structure of hope and purpose which Miriam had built; a blow which caused it to rock and tremble to its foundations. This involved all whom she loved in the world. They were not many—two human beings only—but Miriam loved her brother and his wife with all the intensity and depth of such concentration; and the agony, not only of her own suffering, but of the intolerable, terrible compassion she felt for them both, almost overpowered her for awhile. But the demand for action was too imminent, the necessity for concealment was too absolute, to admit of any yielding on Miriam's part which the utmost strength of her will could subdue. She bore it, not blindly, not listlessly, but with a keen-sighted intelligence which looked it through and through, which saw it all, and foresaw it all, every phase of the humiliating withdrawal of the animating spirit from the form of the one, every successive wrench in the process of the breaking of the strong, loving, simple heart of the other.

Of a truth, her palace of pride and pleasure rocked and reeled.

Three days later, Miriam was in London, at her house in Lowndes Square, where a few rooms had been prepared for her occupation. A pretext was found for getting Florence up to town, in Miriam's wish to avail herself of her taste in the finishing of the house. Unconscious Florence was quite pleased. She wished Walter had shown more interest about it, but he merely assented. He would brighten up when he found himself in town. A day was fixed for their arrival with the baby and their servants. Mr. Martin was to come to London also, but without their knowledge, and not to Miriam's house. He would arrange for a consultation with certain famous

physicians, and then Florence must be told—something—must be to some extent prepared.

“If she does not read it in my face the moment she crosses the door,” said Miriam half aloud, as she stood leaning her head on her raised hands, turned with their open palms against the wall, in a room of her London house, as she stood, one night in Paris, by the wires in her aviary, in the perplexity of a far less trouble. “I could bear it for him, but I cannot bear it for her. Oh, Florence, Florence!”

A bell rang loudly, and Miriam started from her forlorn attitude, and looked into the street, with a momentary terror lest they had already arrived. Absurd! They could not be here for hours yet. How she dreaded seeing Walter now! What had that former dread, which she had almost forgotten, been to this? If he should be more vacant, more indolent, more forgetful, more gluttonous! If—— What else *must* he be? There could be nothing else but sinking lower and lower until the blank was reached. How awful! how awful! Would to God that he, her brother whom she loved, might die first! She turned her white, miserable face at the sound of a step. A servant approached her, with a card on a salver.

“Are you at home to that gentleman, ma’am?”

She took the card, and read: “Mr. Lawrence Daly.”

CHAPTER XXXIX.

L—— D——.

THEY had been an hour together, these two, who had never met before, but to each of whom the idea of the other had been familiar for years. It was surely a kind Providence that had sent Lawrence Daly to Miriam at such a moment, and his coming was a good omen. He was the one person in the world who knew and loved Walter as she did, perhaps better, with the deeper knowledge, and the fuller love of close companionship and a common life. He had known Florence in her early time of trouble, and he would pity and aid her in this, a far drearier and darker day. A friend to herself in her great loneliness, a counsellor in her great perplexity—all these thoughts had come in an instant to Miriam as she read Lawrence Daly's name, and were strengthened with her first glance at him.

And Lawrence! What were his thoughts as he stood in the presence of that "Miriam" who had been a "phantom of delight" to his fancy, for many a day before she "dawned upon his sight"? How had he pictured her to his imagination, in those days when he and Walter used to talk about her in the lone hut, and in the later time when he learned that his friend's beautiful sister was a widow? He could not have put his own fancy into words, but it certainly had not resembled this reality—a pale woman, with a face in which grief and dread, and a kind of relief and pleasure too, were contending; a woman as oblivious of herself, of any effect she might produce, as if she had been old and ugly, who, while she looked at him

and spoke to him, and welcomed him with an outstretched hand and kind words, was so evidently seeing something else in her mind's eye that she instantly communicated a sensation of fear to him. Was she even beautiful, this Miriam—of whose face he had drawn many an ærial picture—as she stood there, in her long crape dress, clasped with jet, and her widow's cap, which had fallen off, and was clinging by its crimped edge to her rich bright hair, until she pulled it on, and tied the strings under her chin, in perfect unconsciousness? Perhaps not; he could not tell; but so much was certain, that ever until the end, whenever he chose to do so, Lawrence Daly could bring her before his mind's eye as he saw her in the first minutes of that first interview.

They had been an hour together, and Miriam had told Lawrence how it was with Walter, and he had received the intelligence with such emotion as had in some strange way comforted her with the soothing sense of a shared sorrow. And he had told her the story—of which poor Florence had been able only to give her a garbled version and a bare outline—the story of the nugget and the murder, and of Walter's mysterious oblivion. She listened, with a new sense of awe creeping over her. Once more Walter's nerves had been subjected to a great trial, and again that wondrous, inexplicable gift of memory had failed him, had been withdrawn from him. As Lawrence described first the doubt, and then the fear, and finally the terrible certainty with which he had noted this mental change in Walter, an eager longing awoke in her to add her testimony also, to tell him that she could understand—she had suffered from them all. The bond of absolute secrecy between her and the mind over which a veil was being slowly but surely drawn, began to be intolerable to her. The story itself interested her vividly, and the calm, manly way in which Lawrence spoke, quite unaffectedly, of the loss of the gold, and the necessity for further exile in which it involved him, impressed her deeply. He knew she was expecting Walter's arrival in town—he had heard that from Miss Monitor, whose

address he had procured in Paris, and at whose cottage he had called on the previous day—and he had come to Mrs. St. Quentin's house hoping to find his friend there ; but learning that she was as yet alone, he had not been able to resist the temptation to introduce himself. If he had not found her in such trouble—trouble which no one could so truly estimate and share as he, he should have had to ask her forgiveness. She assured him, frankly, that she had never thought of him as a stranger, and that his name was a household word at The Firs.

"Literally, a household word," she repeated, "for the baby's name is—Lawrence."

The slightest tinge of colour came to her cheeks as she pronounced the name, which sounded to him like delicious music.

"Poor child," said Lawrence ; "poor young wife!"

"And she loves him so—oh, how she loves him ! I cannot imagine how she will ever bear it."

"*I can*," he said, solemnly. "I have seen Mrs. Clint endure sharp trial for his sake, with a self-sacrificing simple courage which I have never forgotten. She will bear this—far, far worse than anything which has gone before—also for his sake, with the same."

Miriam told him everything. They talked of the past, the present, and the future of Walter and his wife, and Lawrence gave her some hope. It might be a long time before Walter should grow worse, and in his present state there was nothing which would expose him to general remark, nothing which would make Florence very unhappy when she should be reconciled to the first painful truth that her Walter was unlike other people, and changed from his former self. Miriam listened to him with growing confidence. This friend of her brother's was a strong man, with a kind heart, brave and gentle ; she knew so much of him long ago, when Florence used to talk to her about Daly. He was unlike all the other men she was acquainted with, simpler, more kindly, more serious. It was true that she saw him, for the first time, under very peculiar circumstances ; but, nevertheless, she felt that no other man she had ever known

would have, in the given case, been just the same as he was.

Was he at all like the picture her fancy had painted of him? Florence's description of him had been very vague, as a woman's description of any man, except the one she loves, is apt to be, and Miriam had retained no more of it than the facts that he was tall, and had a long, fine brown beard. As she grew calmer, and their conversation took a more settled tone, Miriam began to study his appearance, and to recognize how handsome he was; of how noble and grand a presence. Where had she seen a face, not exactly like Lawrence's face, but of which his reminded her? A face with fine, clear-cut features, a broad forehead, and "level fronting;" dark-grey eyes, sweet and piercing, under dark brows and shaded with thick, dark lashes. Very strange and beautiful eyes, with a man's courage looking out of them, and a woman's pity. No wonder Florence had trusted this man, and Walter had loved him.

"Did he speak of me often?" Lawrence asked, as Miriam was describing her visit to The Firs.

"Very often; but I had been warned by Florence to say nothing of—of the story you have told me, because it distressed him, and so, much of the most interesting part of your life in California was not discussed."

"I understand. Poor Walter thought I had got a craze, and now I shall never be able to undeceive him."

"I suppose not," said Miriam; and again, as many times before during their interview, unheeded tears ran down her cheeks. "There will be no possibility of correcting an impression made on his poor mind now."

"Not only for that reason, which, I trust, is not so decisive as you fear," said Lawrence, "but because the clue I hoped to obtain is lost."

And then he told her the sequel to the story of the nugget; his meeting with Deering at New York, and the final loss of the pocket-book.

"I had to relinquish the hope of finding the gold then," he continued, "and to apply my mind to turning our dust to some purpose. I had Walter's share as well as my own, you know. And I have not done badly, on the whole—I shall give the poor fellow an account of my stewardship before I return."

"Are you going back to America?"

"Yes; I have got into a groove there, and I shall keep in it until something worth having has come of my 'pegging away.' There is no particular object for me in England now—unless, indeed, I could do something for Walter, but I fear that is taken out of my hands—and I shall return before long. Some day or other, I mean to revisit the old place, when this wonderful railway which is to join the Atlantic and Pacific shores shall be finished; and perhaps, if I am not too rich to care about it—than which nothing can be more unlikely—to try once more to hit upon the spot where Walter buried that Will-o'-the-Wisp, our nugget. I have made a drawing from memory of our hut and its vicinity, the cliff, the ravine, and the claim generally. I will bring it to you. It will interest you to get an idea of the place where Walter lived so long."

"It is very hard," said Miriam, "that Walter, who owes his life to your care, should have been the means of obliging you to forsake your own country."

Lawrence looked very sad.

"I don't think Walter has much to thank me for, Mrs. St. Quentin, if it be with him as we are forced to think it is. It would have been better for him, perhaps, if he had died of the fever in the lone hut."

"Oh, no!" said Miriam, and her eyes sparkled for the first time, within his sight of them, with their beautiful brightness—"Oh, no; better far as it is for *her*—for Florence. He came back to her; she has had much happiness—a good store for remembrance, if it is to have no added day; and if he can only live, live *anyhow*, if he only *is*, and is *hers*, she will be

happy still, I am sure she will. Anything—anything for *her* rather than life without him !”

Since when had Miriam learned the worth and the meaning of love? How had her calm appreciation, the deliberate judgment of an outsider, become obscured? What had taught her, all of a sudden, to read the heart of a woman like Florence, hitherto a mystery to her, vaguely beautiful indeed, but which, nevertheless, she was content to leave unsolved?

Lawrence looked at her, and wondered—wondered at the sudden transition of look, of attitude, of colour, which in a moment revealed the beauty, the brilliancy, the life with which his fancy had invested her; wondered at the intuition which made this woman, who had never loved—so Walter had told him, but, after all, how did Walter know?—who had certainly made a marriage the very opposite of Florence’s—free of the whole motive and mystery of Florence’s life.

“You are right,” he said, “and I was wrong. Perhaps, for the moment, I was thinking of Walter himself only. But—to return to what you said—I am not so much of an injured individual after all. I have no ties, and have been more or less of a waif always. The strongest bond between me and my country, or rather between me and England—for I am an Irishman, you know—is Walter.”

Those sweet and piercing dark-grey eyes, with their dark brows and lashes, were, then, the “Irish eyes” she had heard people talk of. Where had she seen them in a picture? Was it in an artist’s studio in Paris? So ran her truant fancy while he was speaking.

“He told me you had no relatives.”

“I have none. The last individual with whom, so far as I know, I might have claimed kindred, died six months ago, though I did not know the fact for nearly three months afterwards. I was in the Southern States at the time, and did not hear of it until I got back to New York. May I tell you a story about myself, Mrs. St. Quentin—or shall I go away now, and come again another day?”

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "Pray, stay with me ; pray, go on! You will remain and see Walter, will you not?"

"If you wish it. If it will not harm him."

"I don't think it can ; he is only too impassive. Then that is settled ; you will stay."

Her manner was abrupt and nervous. He imputed it, and so did she, to the agitation of the expected arrival. At all events, whether it would be wise for him to see Walter or not, it was certainly as well that Miriam should not be left alone.

They were sitting, one at either side of the fireplace ; and Miriam now pushed her chair back—the flame was catching her face. A large green carriage-fan lay on the mantelpiece, and Lawrence rose and handed it to her unasked. She thanked him, and sat, holding it in her left hand between her face and the fire, looking up at him.

He began, with a smile, half sad, half comical, "I told Mrs. Clint all about myself once. I wonder whether she repeated any of my not very moving history to you?"

"She did," said Miriam. "Florence told me about your mother's death, and your expectations from a relative in India, who disappointed them. I think she said you had had no communication with him for a long time, and had given up all hope of his keeping his promises, before you went abroad with Walter."

"That is a perfectly correct outline of the story. But, not very long ago, this interrupted communication was renewed, under rather singular circumstances. The relative in question was not only a relative, but also a connexion by marriage. He married my mother's sister, my best friend, and the only human being whom I loved, or who loved me. He deceived and cheated her for a long time with delusive promises of what he would do for me ; but she died, nearly seven years ago, and then it was all over. There was nothing more to be looked for in that quarter, except, in the very unlikely event of the old gentleman's dying without a will, my succession to his property as heir-at-law. Upon this possibility, however, I never suffered

my mind to dwell for a moment. Though his wife was dead, and he had no child, there was no likelihood, even supposing he did not marry again—as I felt certain he would, and as he actually did—that he should not have many to prefer before me, whom he had never seen, and against whom I believe him to have been deeply prejudiced. In fact, I am quite certain he hated me, very nearly all through his life, and would have gone on hating me until the end of it, but for the interference of some influence or other, which I have vainly tried to trace. Once I did think I had traced it ; but a question which I casually asked of a lady—the only lady, except yourself, I have seen since I came to London—was answered in a manner to disperse that notion, to my regret.”

Miriam did not quite understand him. There was something more in his voice and manner than the story he was narrating, as she followed it with a secret nervousness for which she could not account. There was something which seemed in an inexplicable way personal to herself in what he was saying.

He continued :—“ Pray, bear in mind, for otherwise you will fail to understand my story, and myself, that I never entertained the remotest expectation of succeeding to my relative’s property, and that when, a few months ago, the circumstances occurred which I am about to relate, the notion was, if possible, more utterly removed than ever by the discovery that he had married in the interval, as I expected him to do. A few weeks after I met Deering at New York I began to tire of his society. He was a man I never liked, belonging to the tribe of ‘ smart men,’ whom I detest, and troubled with no delicacy of mind whatever. I am too old a traveller to be thin-skinned, and I don’t mind inquisitiveness as a general rule ; but my patience gave way under the perpetual cross-questioning of Deering—one of the most secret, stealthy, mysterious fellows in the world about his own affairs, of which I did not want, of course, to know anything—and I said to him I believed he must have some motive for being so excessively

curious about me, my ancestors, and my antecedents. I didn't half mean it, and I was sorry, in half a second, for having said it. But it seemed I had hit a blot. The whole mystery of Deering's interest in me was revealed—not that he would not even then, I believe, have gone on concealing it, only that the moment had arrived at which I must needs appear upon the scene. The interest was of a pecuniary nature. It turned out that Deering's attention had been attracted by an advertisement in the *Times*, repeated in some New York papers, in which information was required concerning a certain individual, whom he at once identified with me, and that he had been for some time in correspondence with the agent in Paris to whom this information was to be supplied. He did not defend himself in the matter, he did not think he required defence; nor do I think so. He argued, very justly, that whatever I was to hear to my advantage would not be increased if the information came direct from me—which indeed it couldn't have done, for I never saw one of the advertisements, and should, but for Deering, have been in perfect ignorance until this day—and that it could not be decreased by his having turned an honest penny by supplying the information. How many honest pennies he actually did turn I do not know, but a good many I don't doubt; and he and I parted no worse friends because he had made some money out of me in that way, and one or two other ways—and because I positively declined acting on his advice. I always suspect he had pledged himself to produce me bodily, and had been paid in advance, but he succeeded in producing nothing but my handwriting."

"What was this man's advice to you?" asked Miriam, in a low voice, as she took the fan in her right hand, interposing it between her face and his.

"His advice was that I should go to Paris at once, and present myself to the agent. But why should I have done so, Mrs. St. Quentin? The relative who was now advertising for me, from a motive which I could not understand, had deceived,

trifled with, and disappointed me before, and I had gotten over it, lived it down, prospered moderately, and at least worked hard, without his aid. How should I know what were his intentions now? I had no further claim upon him; he had married again—a young wife, too, but this time a young wife who knew nothing about me, who was nothing to me, whom he could not torment and rule through me, as he had, I firmly believe, tormented and ruled his first wife. I was not going to yield one scrap of my independence, to abandon my least intention for him; he might mean something—in which case his meaning would keep;—he might mean nothing—in which case I should not be put to inconvenience. I told Deering my mind plainly; and then I perceived that Deering must have made all he expected to make by the transaction, for he did not urge me. He pressed me on the point of going to England in the spring—I was then just about to go down South, and he got me to write a few lines to the effect that I would do so—and we parted. When I returned, I found the whole thing settled for me. Deering had heard from the agent in Paris; my letter had never reached him—I suppose it had been mislaid by Deering, or somebody to whom he had trusted to mail it—however, it did not matter, for the information was no longer of value to any one. The wealth, which only a freak of fortune or a *dernier ressort* of the law could ever have made mine, had gone into much better hands, which, I pray, may long administer it.” He rose and approached her, drew the fan away with courteous gentleness, and held out his hand.

“Mrs. St. Quentin, I thought you knew—until Miss Monitor told me that you did not—that your husband’s name was Clibborn; he changed it to St. Quentin because there was once a general of that name of kin to his mother, and it sounded better: I knew nothing about that until Deering found it out from Caux—and that his first wife was my aunt Kate.”

Miriam sat before him, motionless, white, silent. She made

no movement towards taking the hand which he held out, though she saw it, and oh ! wretched woman, saw the smile, drawing her heart from her bosom into his, which went towards her with the hand.

He coloured, drew back, and said : “I beg your pardon. I have offended you. I should have told you this in some other way.”

She only said with a gasp for breath, and an increase of her frightful paleness : “You are L— D—.”

He did not understand her, and he was alarmed. What had he done ? What cruel folly to try her nerves in any way, when they were already so tried by grief and anxiety.

“I entreat you to forgive me,” he stammered. “I did not think—I fancied it would please you to know there was another tie between Walter’s friend and yourself. I ——”

“Hush !” she said, in a voice so hoarse and unmusical that its sound still more alarmed him. “It is no matter ; it is no fault of yours. Don’t mind me.” She stood up, catching at the mantelpiece with her left hand. “Please to leave me for the present, Mr. Daly,” she said, “and not to speak to me. I have changed my mind. You must not meet Walter to-day. I will write to you. But go now, pray go.”

He lingered for a moment, but her face told him it was best to obey her, and he went without a word.

CHAPTER XL.

SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

So it had come ! A horrible, swift retribution, which revealed while it punished her sin ! Miriam sat like a stone statue, after Lawrence had left her, thinking, with intensity unmeasured by time, to which a minute's duration was like a year's agony, of that which had befallen her. The event she had relegated to the past, the thing that was gone and done with, the trial she had come through—they were here, in horrible, actual presence of her, under a terrific form which her imagination could not have conceived. How often must she have been near touching this truth, which, had she touched it, would have saved her ! What a film of accident had hidden it from her ! All was plain to her comprehension, and yet all was confused to her senses ; she had not understood the details clearly, and yet she could not have endured Lawrence Daly's presence one more minute without losing her senses. She needed them more than ever now. What a small thing might have saved her, even the mention of the name of her brother's companion to her husband ! At the thought of the old man the painful frown upon her set face deepened. She hated him now, she hated him in his grave—and of late she had forgotten him. She had been glad sometimes to feel that the remembrance of him did not trouble her—did not recur for many days together, and then but vaguely, and without bitterness. It returned now, when this dreadful blow fell upon her—this blow, whose weight and terror she did not yet understand to the full—and with it the hate which she had believed was long

since conquered. If he had not been so brutal, so sneering about her brother ; if he had not shown such utter indifference to her feelings, such cold contempt for Walter ; if he had not made him and his story a prohibited subject, all must have been revealed, and the man to whom he sought to make reparation discovered in Walter's friend, who had saved Walter's life. But it was not reparation to Daly, but revenge on her, the old man had sought. When, in the torrent of her thoughts, this one rushed hot and bubbling to the surface, Miriam clasped her hands upon her head and groaned : " Revenge on me ! Oh ! my God ! has he not had it ? "

How nearly she had touched the truth, that night in Paris, when she had discovered that Bianca had stolen the letter which Daly wrote to her for Walter ! What was that he had said about the old man's second wife ? " He had married again, this time a young wife, who knew nothing about me, whom he could not torment and rule through me, as he had tormented and ruled his first wife. " And yet it was through Lawrence Daly he had tormented her, had driven her to the deed she had done. If he had given her back that letter on that night, and she had given him the explanation she had refused—what then ? Ah ! who could say ? But, at least, not this horrible, hopeless, irremediable calamity.

He was Walter's friend, the man who had rescued him from ruin in London, the man who had saved his life in the Golden State—and Walter had for his sake, and under her instructions, robbed him of his inheritance. Robbed him ! Yes. Miriam used no palliative forms of expression now. What had become of her theory of the forgery ? What had become of her argument that the felony was only a name, and she might offend against the formula of the law, while keeping its spirit uninjured, its intention undefiled ? What extraordinary sudden enlightenment was this ? Because Lawrence Daly was the injured man, and he her brother's friend, why should her mind undergo such a revolution as that implied in her recognition that her act of " simple justice, in self-defence, " was an enor-

mous crime? An "L—— D——" existed somewhere, she had always known, intended by her husband to be his heir, to her detriment and discomfiture. Had she not injured *him*? She had taken no thought of this; she was no more capable of abstract ideas than other women—if the philosophers who so complacently vivisection them be right. But the truth which came to her in this dread shape—whence its form was derived she did not yet ask herself—she saw fully, knew through and through, and pressed its sharp arrows, with all the force of her will, into her conscience and her heart.

Unbounded horror, unspeakable remorse! These were the occupants of her soul, as Miriam sat by the fireside in her new home that day, on every side of her the signs and tokens of the wealth she loved, and had done this thing that she might have it and enjoy it. Remorse, not yet repentance. She had not yet come to see the wrong done to her own soul! her mind was busy, to the point of exquisite torture, with her crime against this man—this man with the god-like smile, and the voice sounding as no other voice had ever sounded in her ears. What a terrible vindictive fate was hers, and with how sudden a rush it had come upon her! Only a little while ago—the sun that had risen upon her sleepless anguish of expectation and fear had not yet gone down into twilight—and she had thought nothing could add to her grief for Walter and for Florence. And now? Now she was catching, wretch as she was, drowning in this sea of remorse and terror, at the shred of comfort supplied by Walter's loss of memory!

He would not remember when Lawrence Daly should have told him that the old man who had disappointed his hopes, and turned him adrift upon the world, was the same old man to whom his sister Miriam had sold herself for money (in her dismay Miriam was quite merciless to herself, and would not take the mixed motives which had led to her marriage into account), that he had personated this old man, and forged a will in his name. The calamity which had come upon him would save him from any part of what she was suffering, and

always must suffer. What was that sound her lips had formed? "Thank God!" Was she then driven to such desperate straits that the affliction which had been to her "as a terror of great darkness," only a few hours ago, was turning to her sole source of consolation, her sole chance of endurance and concealment? Yes, it was even so; and while Miriam's heart ached with the thought, her judgment compassed the measure of her dismay and defeat by it.

Florence! Had she forgotten Florence, while she had thought that it was better her brother's intellect should be clouded, and his prime of manhood turned to helplessness and decay, than that he should know what he had done for her, in all its extent and its consequences? Had she forgotten Florence, for whom she had been suffering such agonizing compassion? Yes, she had forgotten her for awhile; but when she remembered her, she did not think differently. Something told her that if Walter had proved unable to keep the secret of their crime, as she had no doubt he would have proved when Daly's identity with the L—— D—— of the memorandum should have been revealed—the knowledge of it would have been far worse to Florence than the future with which she was threatened could ever be. She had interpreted Florence aright to Daly. While her husband *lived* and was *hers*, she would not be entirely unhappy. But, to know him for what he was, however plausibly extenuated, a felon, a forger, would break the heart that loved him, as surely as that heart was holy and pure. Then there tumbled into the torrent of her thoughts this importunate question: Why? She wanted to go on, to think about herself, to form some plan of action, but she could not. Why? What was this which existed in Florence, and set her above the earthliness of love, while it kept fresh within her all its tenderness, and sweetness, and self-devotion? There was no answer yet, but it was to come to Miriam at no distant period.

Who shall tell the warfare of thought which raged within her tortured mind as she sat there, so still to all outward appearance? As well attempt to paint the forms, the motive, the

fantastic fury of the storm-clouds when a hurricane is abroad, or the leaping of the waves it lashes. After a time she rose, and, pursued by a terrible perplexity, began to pace hurriedly up and down the room, like one lost, holding her head in her hands. The whole thing had suddenly become unreal, inexplicable, impossible to her. Had she done this deed? How had it come to pass that she had done it? She, a lady, educated and dwelling in decencies, to whom the mere idea of deliberately breaking the law, rendering herself amenable to the penalties under which "common people" constantly fell, of committing a vulgar crime, was so impossible that, even when she had done it, it had not been, in her eyes, a vulgar crime, and she had never thought about the penalties. Could it be? Was it real? She leaned up against the wall breathless, and horrified, as the power of something external to herself came over her with full conviction, and she felt as one might feel who had committed a murder while walking in sleep, and awoke dabbled with the blood of the victim. Thus Miriam gained her first insight into the deadliness of temptation, learned the awful lurking possibilities of human nature, the terrible irrevocableness of an evil deed. "Dead is dead." And worse; she could not bury this dead thing—it was all around and about her, a maddening, haunting presence. She did not know that its sepulchre could be only when remorse should have changed to repentance.

In her hurried, distracted walk, she caught sight of a time-piece. Walter and Florence would arrive in half-an-hour. How she had dreaded that moment, which now she dreaded only lest she should not be able to control herself sufficiently to ward off suspicion! She went to her room, and her maid dressed her; and she agreed with Mrs. Haines that she was looking very pale and tired; and she went downstairs again, and received her brother and his wife with great self-command. But Florence thought her looking "shockingly ill;" and Mr. Martin, who came in the evening, reprimanded her sharply, and told her he had expected better things of her.

There was not much change in Walter. He was very dull, and indifferent, and sleepy. But Miriam observed speedily that Florence was not altogether unconscious. She tried to rouse him, seemed anxious, watched him with sad eyes; and when he heard from Miriam—who had to strive fiercely for composure in telling him—that Lawrence Daly was in London, and would see him the following day, and only said “All right,” appearing to forget it the next moment, she was quite evidently distressed. This was better; their task would be easier. That night Florence, pleading the fatigue of her journey, avoided seeing Miriam alone; and Miriam wrote to Lawrence Daly a few formal lines, inviting him to visit her brother and his wife on the following day. Then, for the first time in her life, she lay broad awake until the morning. There were to be many sleepless nights for Miriam, and long days of perplexity and suffering, before she learned to mourn, not that her sin had “found her out,” but that she had “done this great wickedness *against God*.”

“You would not deceive me, I am sure? You would not be persuaded that anything so cruel could be kind or just?” pleaded Florence to Mr. Martin and Lawrence Daly, many days later, when she had been told the truth, and when the fiat had gone forth that her Walter must be, for the few years he would probably have to live, one between whom and his kind there would be an increasing separation. She had borne it well, submissively, she who was so proud of him! But her mind was haunted by one fear, which she now sought to allay. Would they ever take him away from her? Would those doctors send him to strangers, to try for cure, who might indeed be very wise, and even gentle, but who would banish her from him? She had avowed this fear to Mr. Martin and to Lawrence, to whom she clung with the old trust intensified a thousandfold. But they were now reassuring her.

“Indeed, we would not deceive you, or consent to your being deceived,” said Lawrence, pressing her patient hands in his, and looking through eyes dimmed with tears into her sweet,

beseeking face. "You will never be asked to part with Walter: on the contrary, all our hope and trust are in you. He will never need any other care than yours, and it may be that will avail for a long time. Don't fear this, dear Florence; it will never befall you."

"Thank you," she said, turning her eyes first on him, and then on Mr. Martin, with submissive gratitude which wrung their hearts. "Then I can bear it very well. I could bear it, if God willed it otherwise; but I am very thankful that I may have my Walter with me; that He has made this light to me—so much lighter, I mean. And—and—I don't think he will ever be unhappy, for he will always, you know, be the same to his little world—to me and baby."

Then she left them, and went to him; and while the two men stood, unable to say to one another what was in their minds, Florence was kneeling beside her husband, with her arm encircling his head, as he slept the heavy sleep from which it was so difficult to rouse him, and her sweet lips murmuring, close to his changed face, delighted thanksgiving, as of a mother over her infant. Wonderful inarticulate words of love and prayer that, for the mind darkened upon the earth, the soul might be white before the Throne.

Walter, and Florence, and Miriam were to go abroad soon, to certain baths in a remote part of Germany, which they were advised to try for Walter. He was quiescent and easily managed, but he displayed a growing disinclination for any society but that of Florence and his child. From the first he took little notice of Daly; and gradually ceased to care for Miriam's presence. Florence remonstrated with her on her resolution to accompany them to Germany. Why should Miriam leave her new house, and change all her plan of life, to go with them? She knew it was to be with her; but how little they could be together! She should be always occupied with Walter; and Miriam must not think, while that was so, she ever could be unhappy. The innocent sufferer, she on whom the family calamity fell with all its weight, was support-

ing and comforting the other, out of the treasures of her self-devotion and of God's grace. But Miriam was determined. If she were only to see Florence occasionally in the day, and to say "good morning" and "good night" to her, she would go. She cared nothing for her house now, and her plans of life were all laid aside.

Since their first interview Miriam and Daly had never been alone together—this by Miriam's contrivance. So he had not been able to solve the mystery of her dismissal of him on that occasion, and the painful impression of it remained. He took infinite blame to himself for the manner in which he had told her his story ; he had laid stress on the injuries Mr. St. Quentin had done him, and she, doubtless, thought he included the will in the category, whereas nothing had been farther from his intention. If he could have made her understand that the most he had expected, if he and Mr. St. Quentin had met, was a kindly recognition, and that he regretted nothing but that he had not had the chance of shaking the old man's hand, and relegating by-gones to the region of by-gones. Had she suspected him of coming to her in the contemptible character of a complainant, of a disappointed expectant ? If so, it must have been the fault of his own manner ; and yet, the mere notion was somehow derogatory to her. How could she regard this old man's wealth as of such importance—to him, he meant, or to herself—as to give it such a place, in such an interview, under such circumstances ? Why did she not regard the coincidence that there was a connecting link between her dead husband and her brother's friend as the trifling matter which, though interesting, it really was ? He could not forget, though he would fain have forgotten, Walter's strictures upon Miriam's marriage, and upon her love of luxury, her over-estimate of wealth. It must be some inexplicable feeling of this kind, some absurd, unworthy notion of a claim, or a censure upon her inheritance, which had caused her offence with him. Lawrence laughed at the idea, but the laugh was not genuine, and the annoyance was, and also keen.

He would explain himself fully, and rectify this, at the first opportunity; there must be nothing in his mind to dim the image he had set up there of Miriam. But she never gave him a chance. She met him with graceful coldness; her manner was perfect, and utterly wanting in all he desired to find in it, so that he asked himself if the frank confidence, the intimacy, the emotion which had characterized their first meeting, had existed in reality or in his presumptuous fancy? She treated him with the utmost courtesy, *as Walter's friend*, and never for one moment lowered the barrier between him and herself, which rendered any recurrence to the circumstances of their first interview impossible. He was puzzled, disappointed, disheartened, and only the sad need in which Florence stood of his sympathy and help, and her perfect trust in him, hindered his taking an abrupt leave of them all, and returning at once to America.

Only slight reference was made to the relationship which had existed between Lawrence and Mr. St. Quentin. Walter had heard of it without interest, and soon apparently forgotten it, and Florence had said little about it. If he were not forced to believe that Miriam resented it, since she inexorably kept him at a distance, Daly might have thought she also had forgotten it. He saw her almost every day, and every day he felt that it would be better for him to see her no more. Fate had not been propitious to Lawrence Daly. Of all the women in the world, his world at least, Miriam was the only one whom it was absolutely forbidden to him to love. He had never loved, never imagined that he loved any woman, until now. And now that one impossible, unattainable woman had taken such full, utter, immediate possession of his heart, and his soul and his senses, that all life to come must be one dead level of aimless endeavour, unprofitable labour, mere waste, because she would never love him, never belong to him! He was a strong man, reticent and brave, a man who knew how to take the training and punishment of life, as they ought to be taken by those who are going up higher to the guest-tables of the

Master ; but he winced, and writhed, and shuddered under the infliction of his fate. He knew the warp in her character, for he was not a blind lover,—of the kind who, when their eyes are opened, are most unreasonable tyrants to women,—but clear-sighted, who loved *her*, not a glorified fancy of her, and it made the circumstances more fatal than they must otherwise have been, had he entertained even the faintest hope that he might win her. How would she, warped as her mind was, by her false estimate and love of money, regard a profession of love on his part—he who would have been her husband's heir but for the will which gave all to her? Perhaps her cold, resolute avoidance was intended as an intimation to him that such an expedient for the remedy of his disappointment, in which it was plain she persisted in believing, was not within his reach.

When this suggested itself to him, Lawrence Daly's power of endurance ceased, and he resolved that, not even for the sake of Florence, would he remain longer in London. On the following day he told Mrs. St. Quentin and Florence that he was going to Liverpool on Friday—it was then Monday—and should sail for New York on Saturday. Florence dropped her needle-work, and began to cry ; but Miriam, sitting idle, was quite unmoved.

"It must have come some time," he said, taking Florence's hand ; "and you are going away so soon, it is but a few days earlier than you would have left *me*. You will send me good news from Germany, and next year, if things go well with me, I will come and see you." Not a word, not a look in all this was addressed to Miriam, who might not have heard it, so perfect was her composure.

"Yes, I know, Lawrence—and you are very kind—but, all seems to come at once—and——" Then Florence, for once unable to control herself, hurried out of the room. Lawrence fully expected that Miriam would follow her. But Miriam sat, her gloomy eyes downcast, in perfect silence.

For only the second time in their lives these two were alone

together. After several minutes of great embarrassment to Lawrence, Miriam said :—

“ I think, Mr. Daly, you told me you had a drawing of the place you and Walter lived at, and of your claim, at the gold mines—will you give me that drawing ? ”

“ Of course,” said Lawrence, much surprised. “ If you wish, I will give it you with pleasure. But it is a mere sketch—and——”

“ Yes, you told me so. But I wish for it, and some day I mean to let Walter see it, and try whether any association with it exists in his mind. Don’t be afraid of my doing anything rash ; I will watch for a good opportunity. Will you bring me the sketch to-morrow ? ”

As she spoke she drew towards her the cabinet of ivory, silver, and ebony, which formerly stood in her boudoir in Paris, and unlocked it.

“ I will give you an equivalent for your sketch, Mr. Daly,” she continued, in a tone of even more than her customary coldness, as she drew out one of the drawers of the cabinet, and laid her hand on a miniature. “ Look at that likeness. Of whom is it ? ”

He advanced, and took the portrait in his hands. “ It is my aunt Kate.”

“ Mr. St. Quentin’s first wife. It is yours. Don’t thank me ; this, at least, is your right. Or if you will thank me, let it be in action.” She locked the cabinet, pushed it from her, and rose. “ Mr. Daly,” she said, “ I am the last person in the world who ought to ask a favour of you.”

“ But the first,” he replied, earnestly, “ to whom I would render one.”

She bit her lip and frowned, and he took heed that she did so.

“ I have a most particular, a most urgent reason for requesting you to defer your departure. I cannot explain it, I cannot even indicate it. We go to Germany this day fortnight. Will you, as the only service I shall ever ask of you, remain in

England for the same space of time after we shall have gone?" .

Her tone was impassive, but the look in her eyes made Lawrence her slave.

"I will," was all he said.

"And will you tell *no one* that you do so at my request?"

"I will tell no one."

Then she left him: and from that moment, until they exchanged a general farewell, she was never again alone with him. And poor Florence thought he had deferred his departure for her sake.

CHAPTER XLI.

"OUR CLIENT."

THE days before the parting passed away without any remarkable incident, until the last but one had arrived.

Walter, whom Miriam believed to be more conscious of his own state than the others supposed, had assented to the expedition to Germany, without expressing interest or curiosity. He was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, alongside of a table covered with prints and portfolios of water-colour drawings, which it amused him to look at, when he was not too listless and sleepy to be amused by anything. Miriam had been sedulously cultivating this taste of his for some time, and took care to have new prints, photographs, and various kinds of drawings provided for its gratification. On this day Florence had gone out, about some final preparations, Miriam having promised to remain with Walter during her absence. He was rather fretful—an unusual symptom—and Miriam had to apply herself earnestly to the task of amusing him, and to withdraw her mind, by a strong effort, from its own thoughts and troubles.

She had placed some new specimens of photography, in a bright-coloured case, conspicuously within his reach, and after some time he noticed them. It was always vain to endeavour to force his attention ; it must be suffered to take its own desultory course. He sat up, leaned his elbow on the table, and his head on his hand, and began to turn over the contents of the case. They were landscape photographs, selected from striking scenes, and all quarters of the world. Miriam, pretending to be busy with some needlework, watched him

intently. His face was less vacant than usual; there was more purpose in his eyes.

"Sand," he said half aloud, "and great blocks of building—the Pyramids, I suppose." He looked long at each, and laid them by with care, but without reading the inscriptions on the back. "Great trees, branches high up, and huge stems, and a sheet of white water. They can't bring water out rightly, except the still, deep pools. The sea and the moon—only the two of them, alone—I have seen them so, except for our speck of a ship, and neither of them minded that, I should think, and I have seen the sand-plains too."

Miriam laid aside her work and softly drew nearer to him.

"A great desert place, and a dead camel, plenty of bones about—I have seen something like that too.—What's this? Not a photograph. How has it got in here, among the photographs? Miriam!"

"Yes, dear——"

"Look at this. This is a drawing—a pencil drawing: it has no business here, you know."

She came to his side and looked at it.

"I know this place too," he continued. "This is the turn, round the edge of the bluff, as you came up from the valley and there's the hut, and the great rock on the creek." He pointed to each spot on the drawing in turn, as he named it, and there was a gleam of the old brightness in his changed face.

She listened, following his hand.

"There's the ravine. Do you see this little path up the face of it, and those two rocks? I could not climb up there now, Miriam, and I could not scramble up on that rock" (he put his finger on it), "with the other just over my head" (he put his finger on that too), "as I did then."

"What did you do it for, Walter? Were you looking for gold in the rocks in the face of the ravine?"

"No, no," he answered, testily; "I was not looking for gold

there. There isn't any. I don't know why I climbed up between the two rocks, but Daly knows."

"Did you hurt yourself? Did you fall?"

"No. Why should I fall? It was a safe place."

He laid the drawing aside, took up one of the photographs, and went on looking at it, and talking to himself about it. Miriam removed the drawing, on the pretext that it ought not to be among the photographs, and carefully stuck a large pin into the spot which Walter had indicated.

Lawrence Daly and Mrs. Martin dined at Mrs. St. Quentin's house that evening. After dinner Miriam showed Lawrence the drawing, pierced by a pin, and told him how she had tried this experiment. She repeated to him exactly what Walter had said, and added: "Whether I have succeeded or not—whether his memory, faintly aroused, is true or false, I cannot tell or guess. We shall never have any clearer indication than this."

Lawrence looked long at the drawing. "You have done this very ingeniously," he said. "I have not the least doubt that in that spot Walter hid the nugget. Perhaps I shall go in search of it some day, when I need not care about it, or about finding that it has been washed away into some other hiding-place by the flood, there to lurk for thousands of years more, until, it may be, a race shall possess the earth who will not set any store on nuggets."

Then they talked no more about it; and Miriam, seeing that he cared little for this clue, and did but assume an interest that he might not seem indifferent to the effort she had made, wondered why it was so.

They were to part that night. Miriam, Florence, and Walter were to begin their journey early on the following morning.

Florence and Daly talked for some time together, apart from the others, and then Daly came forward, while Florence left the room, to take leave of Miriam. The one was as cold, as constrained, as the other.

"I hope to see you again next year," said Lawrence, "and to find things better. Good-bye."

"I have your promise, Mr. Daly—you remain in England for one fortnight from to-morrow. We—we may have to send for you, you know—if Walter should not bear the journey well."

"I trust there is no danger of that ; but you may rely on my promise. Once more, good-bye."

If she could have trusted herself to meet his eyes, she must have read in them that he loved her, and have been made—what she believed impossible—more wretched than she then was. But she did not look at him ; she only gave him a cold, impassive hand for a moment, and, to his "Good-bye," replied, "Farewell."

Miriam left her home with the feeling of one driven away from paradise, after a glimpse of the radiant wonders within its gates. What dross had she been taking for gold all her life until now !—what a vain shadow had she been walking in !—how hollow had been her assurance of peace, where there was no peace !—how base, poor, utterly foolish her ambition ! And this was not the worst of it—oh ! how far it was from being the worst ! This might have been set right ; she might have learned the truth, and put away her delusion for ever ; she might have arisen from it purified, ennobled, but for the base and hateful sin which had sullied her soul ! To stand a criminal before the man she loved, the man who had taught her what was the meaning of life to women who were not such wretches as she—a vile thief, who had robbed him, to feel that the only misfortune which could be added to her destiny would be his love, which she might once have blamelessly tried to win by every harmless woman's art—this was her punishment ! On her knees, in the dead hours of the night, with eyes which could weep no more, with clasped hands and bowed-down head, she acknowledged its justice. It never could be lessened ; the sentence against her never could be repealed ; and with her sense of the depth of her sin,

there must ever grow her comprehension of its astounding folly. Her choice had indeed, like Esau's, been "profane."

The travellers set forth on their journey; and Miriam's fine new house—the decorations on the walls and ceilings were hardly dry, and much of the furniture was not unpacked—went into the dingy livery of an "out-of-town" family's mansion, when all London was in the full tide of its life, in the early summer. Lawrence Daly went every day to look at it, while he was waiting for the expiration of the fortnight during which he had promised to remain in England. One night, very late, in a fit of restlessness, he took his way to Lowndes Square, and fell to studying the house after a manner which made it fortunate for him there was no active and intelligent policeman in sight. It was after all reasonable hours for any light to be visible in the basement story, or at the top of the house, where only, under present circumstances, lights ought ever to have been seen. And yet there was a light in Miriam's boudoir, and the window-sash was open, with the curtains drawn behind it. Daly watched the light, but no figure passed between it and the window. After some time it vanished; and then, in the darkness, he heard the window shut and barred.

"A servant, I suppose," thought Lawrence, as he turned away, "trying what it feels like to sit in a boudoir, and keep fashionable hours."

The following day brought Lawrence Daly a letter, from Messrs. Ross and Raby, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn, to the effect that they had been instructed by their client, Mrs. St. Quentin, to request him to meet a representative of the firm at her house in Lowndes Square, on the earliest day which it would suit his convenience to name, for the purpose of receiving from them, on her behalf, a communication of importance.

So, then, he was to learn the meaning of the promise she had exacted from him. But he was not to learn it from herself, and he felt but a languid curiosity respecting its interpretation. He wanted to get away. He believed that he

should conquer the vain longing for a love that never could be his by change of scene and the resumption of his roving habits. This is a notion which men entertain more commonly and more successfully than women. Miriam had no such hope to sustain her; but she had not the wish either. She would not have loved him less if she could; in her great punishment was her only consolation.

Lawrence replied to Messrs. Ross and Raby that he would be at Mrs. St. Quentin's house at noon the next day, and passed the intervening time in vague and vain conjectures. He kept his appointment punctually, and found Mr. Ross, a clean-shaven, pompous gentleman, and Mr. Clissold, already arrived. The three gentlemen met in the dining-room, a large and handsome apartment, which had been apparently taken out of curl-papers for the occasion. A japanned box, of imposing dimensions, occupied a conspicuous place on the centre table, and two large plate-chests stood in a window. A flat, leather-bound book, marked "Inventories," lay beside the japanned box; and a mass of keys, with ivory labels attached to them, completed the accessories of a scene entirely inexplicable to Lawrence. He had entered the house with a faint, irrational hope that Miriam might be there—he felt how absurd it was to suppose she would return suddenly from Germany, and, if she had done so, that there should be any mystery about it—and yet he was keenly disappointed when the two strangers only met him. The first formal civilities over, Mr. Ross proceeded to discuss the business on which they had come. Mr. Daly was already aware that he was charged with an important communication to him, on the part of Mrs. St. Quentin, and he would make it as briefly as might be.

"You are a relative of the late Mr. St. Quentin?"

"I am."

"His nearest relative, and his heir-at-law?"

"I am."

"Mrs. St. Quentin ascertained, after her late husband's death, that he had been endeavouring to find his heir-at-law.

Some memoranda fell into her hands, showing that he had set on foot inquiries with that purpose, and if he had succeeded he would have bequeathed to his heir-in-law, yourself, his entire property, with the exception of an annuity of two hundred pounds to her, for her lifetime."

"Impossible!" interrupted Lawrence; "he could not have had any such intention. He never——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Daly," continued Mr. Ross, gravely checking him by an impressively-uplifted forefinger. "There is no doubt at all that the late Mr. St. Quentin *did* entertain this purpose. Why he should have changed it so shortly before his decease it is impossible to tell; but Mrs. St. Quentin believes it was because a letter which you wrote to him, announcing your intention of coming to England, did not reach him, and therefore he suspected the person who professed to have gained information about you—a person named Deering—was imposing upon him, and that you had not really been found. When Mrs. St. Quentin passed through Paris the other day she had an interview with Monsieur Caux, an agent who had acted for Mr. St. Quentin, and whom you saw, I think?"

"Yes, I saw Monsieur Caux," said Lawrence, quite bewildered.

"He confirmed Mrs. St. Quentin's previous impressions by his account of Mr. St. Quentin's last interview with him, and he gave her this letter, which you will recognize." Mr. Ross handed to Lawrence his own letter to Mr. St. Quentin, which had not reached its destination for months after it was written. Lawrence glanced at it, and handed it to him again.

"Under these circumstances," resumed Mr. Ross, with added pomposity of manner, "Mrs. St. Quentin, having become convinced that this accidental delay, leading Mr. St. Quentin to believe he had been deceived, constituted in reality his sole reason for making a will in her favour, as he did—Mr. Clissold drew up the instrument"—Mr. Clissold, sedulously fitting his finger-tips together, as he sat by the table, with his

elbows upon it, bowed—"a very short time before his decease, and that his own views and wishes, but for this accidental delay, would have remained unaltered, has renounced the legacy in your favour."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lawrence, pushing back his chair, and starting to his feet. "It cannot be. This is an absurd, a fatal delusion. Nothing on earth should induce me to listen to such a thing! Why should he not have left all his property to his wife, under any circumstances?"

"We cannot enter into that question," said Mr. Ross; "we have only to state our client's views and intentions. Mrs. St. Quentin instructed us some time ago, and last Tuesday executed a deed of gift in your favour: here is a copy of it,"—he raised the lid of the box, and indicated a folded paper—"having returned from Germany for the purpose. By this instrument she conveys to you absolutely the whole of the property bequeathed to her by Mr. St. Quentin, and of which we are prepared to give you all particulars, with the exception of a sum of five thousand pounds, deposited in the Bank of France.

"And do you suppose, for a moment, gentlemen, that I shall accept this—this unheard-of sacrifice from Mrs. St. Quentin, from a lady who owes me no consideration whatever? I cannot assure you emphatically enough that I had *no* expectations whatever from Mr. St. Quentin, and that in no communication which passed between his agent and Mr. Deering, or myself, did he give the slightest indication of an intention to do anything for me. I give you my word of honour, I had no hopes, no disappointments in connexion with this matter."

"As I said before, Mr. Daly, we cannot enter into this portion of the subject. I have now fulfilled Mrs. St. Quentin's instructions. It only remains for me to say that Mr. Clissold will go into particulars with you. There are complete inventories of all plate and other valuables in this house, and also in the apartment in Paris; Mr. Clissold will hand over the

leases and other documents; and, as I have another engagement, I will now take my leave."

"Stay one moment," said Lawrence. "I am quite unfit to speak of this now; I am astonished, shocked beyond measure! I must see Mrs. St. Quentin without an hour's delay. Where is she? She has been here in this house, has she not?"

"She was here for three days," replied Mr. Ross, "making these final arrangements. But she left England yesterday morning."

"To return to Germany! To her brother and his wife?"

"I really cannot tell you, Mr. Daly—I do not know. Mrs. St. Quentin did not furnish us with any address. Her business with us is all completely and most satisfactorily wound up, and we know nothing further about her."

"But you will continue to act for me?" asked Lawrence eagerly. "You will consider me your client?" Mr. Ross signified that Ross and Raby would be very happy to do so. "And you will bear in mind that I distinctly refuse to accept this deed of gift; and that, if I accept the temporary care and management of Mrs. St. Quentin's property, it is only in the character of her representative, and in her interests."

"Very good," replied Mr. Ross; "that is a matter for your own decision entirely." And then he took leave of Lawrence, who remained with Mr. Clissold, surrounded by the signs and tokens of his astounding and unwelcome change of fortune.

Mr. Clissold proceeded to detail the particulars and the dispositions of all this wealth—of which Lawrence had so often thought, in old times, with curiosity, doubtless, and some little envy—in his dry, dull, and business-like fashion; and Lawrence listened, with his mind in great perplexity. Every trivial incident of his first interview with Miriam returned to him, and, feeling that there was a contrast, never lessened and never relaxed, between her reception of him and her manner to him, from the moment in which he revealed his identity until that of their parting, he vaguely scented a mystery beyond the already mysterious circumstances in which he stood.

This absolute renunciation of the wealth she loved, and had bought at such a price, on the romantic plea of carrying out the supposed intentions of a man who had contradicted that supposition in the most positive manner by a will in which no name but her own was mentioned, was wholly inconsistent with Miriam's character, as he knew it, by report and by experience.

Among the objects of value in the room was one to which Mr. Clissold directed Lawrence's attention in its turn. This was a strong teak box, containing a quantity of gold and silver plate, and articles of ornament of fine Indian workmanship. Three trays, lined with cloth, contained these precious things, fitted into sockets; and Lawrence turned them over with some curiosity, until he came to a space, like that into which a looking-glass is usually fitted in the lid of a dressing case, and which was occupied by a portrait on ivory, in a very elaborate gold frame.

This portrait, evidently the work of a native artist, represented a good-looking, elderly man, and was, in fact, that of Mr. St. Quentin, as Lawrence knew, from its likeness to a photograph which he had seen in Florence's book. Mr. Clissold admired the frame, commented upon the combined richness and roughness of the workmanship, and said:—

"One of the family, I suppose?"

"Mr. St. Quentin himself," said Daly.

"Oh! no," said Mr. Clissold. "Didn't you know Mr. St. Quentin?"

"I never saw him."

"I saw him just before he died, you know. He did not look so ill, either, considering. But that's nothing, I'm told, in cases like his; they pop off in a minute, when they're seemingly all right. But he was not the least like that. Different complexion, different eyes. Blue eyes he had, and a pale skin, and didn't look within ten years, even then, of the age of that picture. What's this? A pipe bowl and stem, with turquoise tassels. Beautiful, ain't they?" Mr. Clissold

clicked his boots together under the table, in his admiration, and went on to the other rare and costly objects, unconscious that Lawrence was staring stupidly at the picture, a faint dread, without form or consistence, stirring at his heart.

When Mr. Clissold's task was concluded, and he had left him, Lawrence summoned the housekeeper, who had been, he found, prepared by Miriam for his probably coming to reside in the house. He told her he should only occupy the rooms on the ground floor, and that the remainder of the house must remain shut up for the present. After another interview with Mr. Ross, Daly left England for Germany.

"Do you really, seriously mean that you think Mrs. St. Quentin has done right, Florence, in bestowing upon me wealth which I don't want, and which I won't use, in departing utterly from the—her husband's specific directions—never mind his intentions; *the will is a fact*—and in abandoning all her duties, in the way she has done?"

"I not only think she has done right, but I cannot for a moment imagine Miriam's acting in any other way, when she discovered that Mr. St. Quentin would have made a different will, had he known what she came to know."

"And yet this same woman, with this far-fetched sense of honour, and extraordinary delicacy of conscience, married Mr. St. Quentin for the sake of his money, which she relinquishes for a scruple like this!"

"That is true," said Florence, little thinking what a truth she was uttering; "but Miriam sees things, Miriam understands right and wrong, far differently now."

"Well, you women are incomprehensible. You, too, are against me. I will say no more about this: I shall never abandon my search for her, never abandon my hope of finding her. Walter, you tell me, is in ignorance of all this."

"Yes," she answered, with a heavy sigh. "It would have been useless to tell him. He could not have understood it."

"No, indeed, nor any one else."

"Do be persuaded. Let Miriam's intentions be fulfilled.

So long as you do not accept it, fully and frankly, you will make her wretched, and part us from her, for she will never put herself within reach of seeing you until you have done so."

"It is in vain to try to persuade me, Florence ; I am much more resolute in my purpose than she in hers, though she thinks she has made it irrevocable—stronger by all the added strength of my motive."

She looked surprised, but asked no question. He continued,—

"You persist in refusing to tell me where she is?"

"Yes, I persist. I promised her. I cannot break faith with Miriam."

"She will not remain long away from you. Mind, I warn you, I will have your house watched."

She smiled faintly. "I am not at all afraid of your doing anything of the kind."

Shortly after they parted, and Florence wrote to Miriam a full account of the interview.

"Never mind, dearest Florence"—so ran Miriam's reply. "I only ask a year's secrecy ; and, if a woman's influence should intervene before, not even that. If he falls in love and marries, or intends to do so, I need not care how soon after he finds me out. Hiding is *so* easy. He never saw me except in my weeds ; I have laid them aside ; and he passed me yesterday on the platform at London Bridge—the platform, Florence, where you and I parted with Walter—so close, I had barely time to put my veil down."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE ROCKS.

To search for a person who has a strong motive for concealment, without any such previous knowledge of that person's tastes and habits as would supply a "system" on which to work, is not an easy or promising undertaking. Miriam had no friends in London, and Lawrence had no knowledge of her mode of life in Paris to supply him with data for his pursuit. The servants left in the house in Lowndes Square were all strangers; and Monsieur Caux, to whom Lawrence applied, was entirely unacquainted with Mrs. St. Quentin's habits or associates. He had seen her only once—on the occasion of his giving her Lawrence's own letter; and he knew nothing, except that he had been employed against her interests, and that he did not gather from her manner that she resented that circumstance.

To his first attempt, by letter, to induce Florence to reconsider her resolution, Lawrence received a reply which made him desist. If he made any further reference to the subject Florence must close their correspondence, and she begged him to spare her so great a sacrifice. If Lawrence had not had lurking, in the unexplored recesses of his mind, something which was, and yet was not, a suspicion of the truth, an impression which he would not investigate, and could not banish, he might not have shrunk, as he did, from the employment of any other person's services in this matter. He had indeed no right to set detectives on the track of a lady in no way bound to admit him to her presence, if she chose to hold herself aloof from him; and yet she might have

yielded to the temptation to do so, trusting to her pardon, if he had not been tormented by a vague surmise that there was in this mysterious restitution and disappearance something more than the avowed motive. The last person who had seen Mr. St. Quentin alive had not recognized the portrait which Lawrence knew to be that of Mr. St. Quentin, and that person had drawn up Mr. St. Quentin's will! What did all this point at? He dreaded to ask the question of himself, he dreaded the answer. There was a method by which he felt certain he could force Miriam to communicate with him, to come out of her concealment at all events for once. It was by putting an advertisement in the *Times*, addressed to the persons who witnessed the will of the late Mr. St. Quentin. But he could not do this. It was too near to the half-uttered whisper of the truth within him; it might possibly involve Miriam in danger, disgrace—and he loved her!

Lawrence went to Doctors' Commons and read the will. There was nothing to be learned from that. He went to Dover, and found that the head-waiter, who was one of the witnesses, was still there. He was easily induced to talk of the old gentleman who died at the hotel so very unexpectedly, to the dismay of the proprietor, and of the beautiful lady who had so much courage and presence of mind. He recollected the witnessing of the will perfectly, and that the gentleman did seem very ill indeed, though not so bad as to prepare any one for what had happened. There was only one circumstance connected with the event which no one thought of mentioning, and which had never come to Lawrence's knowledge. This was the visit of Mrs. St. Quentin's brother to the hotel, just before the death of her husband. So trifling a fact did not hold a place in any one's mind, and thus the clue escaped Lawrence's grasp. He had taken the Indian portrait of Mr. St. Quentin to Dover, and displayed it conspicuously in his sitting-room. The head-waiter was looking curiously at the frame while he was answering Daly's questions, but without the slightest recognition of the face. His silence was

enough for Lawrence ; he would not ask him a needless question.

After this, great discouragement fell upon Lawrence. He was not a man to grow morbidly weary of his life because its lines had not been laid as he would have had them ; but he felt the position in which Miriam's unaccountable rashness had placed him false and irksome. The influence of the man who had made his youth desultory, and dependent, and unsatisfactory, was still pursuing him, and his future threatened to be as desultory and as unsatisfactory as his past.

Why should he not go away, and give it all up, putting his affairs into the hands of Messrs. Ross and Raby, letting the London house, and leaving the money, which had hitherto done no one any good, to accumulate until such time as he could entirely solve the mystery, or Miriam should have come to her right mind? Here was an easy way out of all his difficulties, and into some new mode of life, which should dissipate the dreariness and perplexity in which he was living ; with only one drawback to it, one little objection, which neutralized every advantage. He loved Miriam, and no life unshared by her could be any more bearable than this, into which there was, after all, a chance that she might come some day.

Lawrence went to The Firs, and wandered all over the empty rooms, and all the places which Walter used to talk about, and with which Miriam was associated. No one there could tell him anything about Mrs. St. Quentin, when he inquired in a casual way. There was a story afloat that another will had been found, and that Miriam had been dispossessed ; and, as no one in the neighbourhood knew the particulars of Mr. St. Quentin's death except Mr. Martin, who did not think proper to repeat them, the explanation was accepted. Lawrence stayed two days at Mr. Martin's house, and had no reason to suspect that he was better informed concerning Miriam's place of abode than himself. One suggestion, not directly bearing on the subject, but which had an attraction for him,

Mr. Martin made. It was in speaking of Miriam's girlhood, and the many adverse influences which had warped her character, originally noble, as her act of restitution, however ill-judged and excessive, proved, that Mr. Martin said: "That Miss Monitor was an honest sort of person enough. I don't like schoolmistresses in general, and I think they can hardly be disinterested, under a special miracle; but she was a good friend to Miriam, on the whole."

"Of course she does not know where she is?"

"I should suppose she does not. Miriam would naturally calculate upon your going to her in the first instance, and she would hardly burden her with such a confidence. Quite enough to impose it on Florence, I should say."

Miriam would naturally calculate upon his going to Miss Monitor in the first instance! And he had not done so, and it had never occurred to him! He did not say so to Mr. Martin, but he determined the next day should find him at Blackheath. He had a kindly recollection of Miss Monitor. Suppose the good-natured, cheery old maid were to find out his secret? What then? He was so solitary and so miserable he hoped she would, or that she would give him some encouragement to reveal it to her. At least there would be some one to whom he might talk of Miriam.

Miss Monitor's cottage at Blackheath was a pretty little dwelling, full of nooks and crannies, which were all filled with appropriate furniture, and it combined a delightful appearance of age with every modern convenience, and no small degree of elegance and refinement. The rooms opened into one another, and the longest flight of stairs in the building numbered only ten low, broad steps. The prevailing tints of the furniture and hangings were warm reds and cool greens, and all the ornaments were of a quaint, simple fashion; with one exception, which caught Lawrence's eye as soon as he was ushered into Miss Monitor's drawing-room, apparently to the displeasure of a very handsome grey parrot, whose cage stood at the open glass-door window leading into the secluded and

richly-cultivated garden, fenced off by a wire railing from the field sacred to Miss Monitor's cow. This exception was a cabinet of ebony, ivory, and silver, much too splendid for its surroundings, and which Lawrence instantly remembered to have seen—where? Surely it had stood on a table in Miriam's drawing-room, and Miriam had touched it on that first day! He was looking at the cabinet, full of reminiscences, when the servant who had ushered him into the drawing-room returned, and, with much confusion and trepidation, informed him that she had been mistaken in telling him that her mistress, Miss Monitor, was at home. She was not aware of it, but Miss Monitor had gone out, and was not expected to return until evening. The girl spoke hurriedly, and held the door wide open, to intimate that the intruder was expected to take his departure instantly. But this did not suit Lawrence's views. "I had something important to say to Miss Monitor," he observed: "since I cannot see her, I will write it." Then he seated himself at a writing-table, opposite the open glass door, and began to write, while the unhappy parlour-maid looked on helplessly, the very image of misery and irresolution.

Presently Lawrence heard a step upon the walk outside the window, and paused for a moment. It was a loitering, proprietorial step, and the two handsome Skye terriers, who lay close to the window-sill, in amiable proximity to the parrot, did not stir or bark. There was a snipping sound, as of the person outside cutting flowers from their stems, and presently a woman stood in the open doorway, arrested by the sight of the man at the table, and from whose unnerved hands tumbled down a basket of gorgeous roses, which fell into the parrot's cage, and on to the dogs' noses, and all over the carpet. Then the parlour-maid shut the door, and fled; and Lawrence looked up, and saw—Miriam!

Yes, Miriam, whom he had been seeking vainly, and who had been, all these months, within his reach!—Miriam, more beautiful than he had ever seen or imagined her!—Miriam, in

whose face he read, even in the instant before she turned and rushed away, something more than surprise and fear, something very different from horror. She rushed away; but in an instant Lawrence followed her, came up with her at the wire paling, seized her by the wrists, and fairly dragged her, with the force and determination of any savage, minded that his prey shall not escape him, inside the glass door. Until then neither spoke; but when he had pulled her in, and stood, still holding her fast, he said one word to her,—

“Miriam!”

“Let me go instantly, Mr. Daly! How dare you?” she gasped.

He loosed her wrists; he stood in the doorway, and he answered her: “How dare *you* do what you have done to me for many a day? How dare *you* make me so miserable, and condemn me to a false position, to satisfy your own pride, or your own fancy?”

“I did not,” she replied, solemnly, and recovering her self-possession completely. “It was neither my pride nor my fancy which dictated what I have done.”

“Then tell me what it was.”

“You have no right to command me in that tone. The explanation I gave you is the true explanation. From the resolution I then made you shall never move me. By what right do you question me further?”

“I will tell you presently. Sit there.” He placed a chair for her; she took it mechanically; and he stood before her, not releasing her for a moment from his gaze. “You have to answer me some questions first. Where have you been since you returned from Germany, and since you sent your lawyers to me with your absurd story about Mr. St. Quentin’s intentions?”

“It—it was not absurd,” she faltered.

“It was; and it was cruel—cruel to yourself and to me. But that is not my question. Where have you been?”

“Here.”

"Here! Good heavens! so near me, when I have been wearying my soul with conjecture, and sickening my heart with hope, always cheated and deferred! Thank God, at length, at last, for its realization!"

She looked at him with timid surprise; she blushed and trembled.

"I see—I know why you did this: being so simple, and so audacious, you calculated, rightly, that I should never think of it. And now I have found you."

"You shall not make me stay here. I will go away. You have no right to pursue me, Mr. Daly, I am free to do as I choose, and to decline such acquaintances as I think fit."

She was making a very poor fight of it—and she knew it. This was the most wretched, the most contemptible of shams! What would you have? Here was a guilty woman, who had laid all her own life waste, struggling in the strong grasp of her first love, in the presence of the man from whom she had fled, because he it was whom she had wronged, and she had learned that he was her master.

"You are *not* free," he replied; "at least you are not free *from me*! And I will tell you why, Miriam, and in doing so I will answer the question you asked me just now: 'What right have I?' I will tell you why. It is because you have bound me to you, and thus cannot be free yourself! It is because no will of yours, no flight of yours, can sever me from you! It is because I love you, Miriam, absorbingly, devotedly, as I have loved you since I saw you, as I believe I loved you before I ever saw you, and because I will win you—you who, I know, have never loved—if it is in love, or man, to win woman!"

She shrank back in her chair, and put her hand out to keep him away. Her eyes closed—a strong shudder ran through her frame; she made a desperate effort—an effort which frightened him—to keep from fainting. At length she stammered out—

"Oh, my God! Can it be? You do not know what I am."

"I do. I know you are the queen of all women to me, the one woman in all the world; my love, my life! Miriam! listen to me; don't reject me—don't tell me the hope that has stirred my heart since I saw your dear eyes shining on me yonder is a delusion like all my life hitherto—the hope that you might come to love me!"

Her hands were clasped over her face now, and he gently tried to remove them. But she rose, suddenly slipped by him, and stood upright, looking steadily at him, between him and the door.

"Hush!" she said, almost in a whisper, and with one hand pressed heavily on her breast, as she steadied herself by catching the mantelpiece with the other, in the well-remembered attitude of their first interview.

"Do not say what I must not hear; do not say what it will break my heart to remember. You do not know, you cannot conceive, how you are torturing me, how utterly beaten, defeated, a wretch I am! There is no escape for me now." She was growing calmer with every word, and here her eyes shone with the fire of a desperate resolution. "You, and yet not you, but my fate, and God's eternal, immutable justice, have hunted me down at last! I have repented, but it does not avail; I have made restitution, but it is not enough; I must make confession too, and be for ever in your eyes what I am in my own."

"Miriam! Great heaven! what can you mean? What can you be in my eyes but the best beloved among women?"

Again she waved him off, and something supremely mournful and majestic in her gesture held him motionless.

"I can be what I am, a woman degraded from her place among women by a base, low, and treacherous crime—a woman who is an undetected felon, at your mercy from this moment."

Over his face there flickered the light of a sudden, terrible perception.

"Who do you think it was that robbed you—not uncon-

sciously, for there was no unconsciousness, save that L—— D—— meant Walter's friend; Lawrence Daly—who do you think it was who did that, and did it by an act of unparalleled treachery? Who do you think it was that signed Mr. St. Quentin's will?"

"I don't know, Miriam," answered Lawrence Daly, in a low, resolute voice, and made two steps towards her; "and I don't care. It was not Mr. St. Quentin; I have known that a long time."

"What! You knew!"

"Yes, I knew; and now, if you have anything more to tell me, you must tell it thus."

She was clasped in his strong arms, she, that tall, well-grown, grand woman, in an embrace which made her feel as small as a child, as weak as a reed, and yet filled her with an awful joy, and a sudden glorious fear, as of one—she thought afterwards, when thought could take form in her mind—who wakes in heaven. Her head was bent back by the clasp of his arms around her figure; and his kisses, full of mercy and of love, stifled the sobs which shook her convulsively, as his lips gathered the tears from her eyelids, and his long, silken beard hid her face from him. There was no need for Miriam's conqueror to ask the lover's question. Lawrence Daly never did, in fact, then or afterwards, ask her if she loved him. There was utter surrender in the first helpless sob which heaved up her heart against his breast, and in the quick shudder with which she nestled there.

Visitors are plenty in the Golden State of late; mere tourists, people who do not come thither to toil, or to barter, or to gamble, but merely to see one of the grandest and most beautiful countries on the face of the glorious earth, to breathe the most delicious air, to realize for once that there is a land in which mere animal living is delightful. The romance of danger, difficulty, toil, and wild adventure is indeed all but gone, but the memory of it is fresh, and many are the visitors now, brought thither commodiously by the giant railway, who have

trod the plains, and toiled through the wilderness in the old time. Among the number of these, last year, was Lawrence Daly. He was accompanied by Miriam. He had said to her once that, when the great railroad which was to join the Atlantic and the Pacific together was completed, he would revisit the Golden State. And now she was there with him, the happiest of women, as she told herself many times a day, wondering humbly at the great rescue that had come to her, and striving that her life should bear fruits meet for so real a repentance as hers. She had never ceased to marvel at Lawrence's love, and she had once told him so, venturing to touch the margin of a forbidden subject, by saying: "It is so wonderful—though you know quite the worst of me."

"*Though—or—because?*" asked Lawrence, with that slow, gradually beaming, beautiful smile of his, which never lost its fascination for Miriam.

She enjoyed this long and varied journey to the full; and her expectation, her revelling by anticipation in sentiment and association, were at the full, when they reached the scene of the long companionship of Lawrence and Walter. Even the remembrance of Walter's feeble state could not obscure Miriam's pleasure. At least he and Florence were happy, she and Lawrence knew.

The settlement was a busy, populous, thriving place now, with a town where the huts had stood in the valley, and a goodly row of stores occupying the site of the one emporium of the days of Lawrence and Walter, with constituted authorities, and many places of good entertainment for man and beast, and one splendid hotel, to which the English party betook themselves. They arrived at night; but an early hour next morning found Lawrence and Miriam following, on foot, the windings of the valley in the direction of the lone hut. Lawrence had already inquired into the alterations made by the course of the famous flood, and was not surprised to learn that the lone hut, well remembered as the scene of the murder of *Spoiled Five*—to whose grave he led Miriam during their

walk—had been partially destroyed by the rush of the water through the ravine and over the face of the great rock. It had been considered hazardous to reconstruct a dwelling in the same situation, and such remains as the flood had spared had been carried away piecemeal. When Lawrence and Miriam rounded the bluff, and came in sight of the stone plateau on which the hut had stood, there was not a trace that it had ever existed.

They approached the place in silence, and stood silent for several minutes, gazing upwards at the rock and the grand sweep of the ravine.

"The hut stood just here," said Daly at length.

"It is all exactly like your drawing," said Miriam, whose eyes were full of tears, easy to be understood. "There is no change at all, is there, except the hut being gone?"

"I don't observe any.—Yes, I do, though. Look there, Miriam, to the right, up along the face of the ravine, at the exact spot where you put the pin in my drawing, where Walter showed you the burial-place of the nugget. Are you following my directions? Yes! Then look; do you not see something which contradicts the sketch?"

Miriam shaded her eyes from the glorious Californian sunshine, and looked eagerly in the direction which he indicated.

"I think I see what you mean," she said. "In the drawing there is a space between those two stones, which lie one over the other there, in the ravine."

"Exactly. Yet I know I drew their relative position correctly, and Walter confirmed it by pointing out to you the space between them. That is, of course, one result of the flood, and would confirm me in my belief, if it required confirmation, that our nugget was not stolen, but swept away by the waters. The undermining of the earth between the upper and lower rock has brought the upper one down on it."

"What a pity the gold should have been lost! I don't mean to us," she added hastily. "We have more than enough of all the world can give, but generally speaking."

"Yet," said Lawrence, "that nugget was unfortunate treasure-trove to us. It is as well as it is. You won't mind waiting here, Miriam, while I climb up that path, and take a look at the place? I want to see whether there is any spot from which a man standing on the rock, under the edge of the ravine, can be seen. I have always suspected that Walter was watched that morning, intentionally or unintentionally, and that poor Spoiled Five was murdered, not by men who came for the gold to the hut, but by men who came in the night to the place where Walter had hidden it."

"Is it dangerous climbing, Lawrence? Is there any risk of your slipping?"

"Not the least, dear. I have not forgotten all the arts of a wild life, if there were."

He collected some loose stones into a tolerably convenient seat for her, and ran across the plateau, was then concealed from her sight for a few minutes, and emerged, scrambling up the face of the ravine.

Miriam watched him intently, following every movement of his alert, active figure with loving eyes, and a heart filled with countless and contending feelings. Once or twice he stopped, and waved his hand, and called to her, his voice easily distinct in the pure, sparkling air. She saw him spring at a tuft of brush-wood, and swing himself up on the projecting edge of the lower rock, and then she saw him stoop, kneel, lie down on the flat surface, and lay his head upon it, apparently peering eagerly into the crevices of its junction with the superincumbent mass of the upper rock. She saw him, clinging to the stone he lay on with one hand, plunge the other, and his arm up to the elbow, into a crevice, which she could not see. He remained in that attitude for some minutes, then withdrew his hand; but she could not discern whether he held anything in it. Then he raised himself, and, standing on the rock, formed his hands into a speaking-trumpet, and shouted to her.

She jumped up, and ran to the edge of the plateau.

"Run down the valley, and bring the first man you meet here."

She obeyed him instantly, running fleetly but steadily, as so few women can run. On and on she sped, until, at a considerable distance beyond the bluff, she saw two men coming leisurely towards her on horseback. Then she stopped, to recover breath, to be intelligible when they should come up to her, which they did presently. She stepped out into the road, and told them that she had been sent to bring help to her husband, who had climbed the ravine, and required assistance, she did not know why. Then one of the two, a fine young fellow, who recognized the English lady he had seen in the town last night, set Miriam on his saddle, holding her with his strong arm, and striding along by the side of his horse, while the other galloped on to Lawrence's assistance.

When Miriam and her escort reached the plateau, the other man was already beside Daly, having tied his horse to a bush. Miriam begged the young man who had come with her to tie up his horse also, and join the other two. He obeyed her at once, and Miriam resumed her seat on the stones. Lawrence was not hurt, she knew that; she could wait patiently for anything more there was to know.

And now, straining her eyes in the direction of the three men, who had not much more than standing-room, and were obliged to move with evident caution on the surface of the rock, she saw them lie down, each in his turn, as her husband had done, and grope, as she supposed, into the crevice, as he had groped. Then they all stood upright and talked earnestly together for awhile, after which they descended the face of the ravine, and the two men went direct to their horses, loosed them, mounted them, and, having gravely saluted her, rode away. Not till then did Lawrence approach her, with face so solemn that it awed her for a moment out of the power of speech.

"Come away, my love!" He raised her from her seat, and drew her hand within his arm.

"What is it, Lawrence? What did you find there?"

"A dreadful thing—a human skeleton! A man on whom the upper rock, no doubt, had fallen and crushed him to death,

while he was digging there between the two, unconscious of the loosening action of the flood."

"Oh! Lawrence, how dreadful! What can you do?"

"Nothing. Those good fellows have gone to the town to give notice of the discovery. I fear I must appear at the inquest, for I only can presumptively identify those dry, bare bones."

"You! Who is it, then?"

"Deering—it must be he! The unhappy wretch lied to me, came hither to dig out the nugget, and this is his terrible fate."

"Oh! Lawrence, how awful! But how do you know?"

"Thus! We found this in a deep crevice behind the lower rock."

Lawrence Daly placed in his wife's shrinking hands *Walter's Pocket-book*.

THE END.

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